

Table of Contents
(25,362 Words)

Greenhouse.....	2
Mori.....	11
News.....	27
House with a Picket Fence.....	32
Uncle.....	40
Oranges in a Dead Rabbit.....	50
Convalescence.....	54
Blue Jays.....	61
Queen.....	68
Perfect Corpse.....	72
Proposal.....	75
Sadie.....	84
Thighs.....	88
Dream.....	90

Greenhouse

I married young but happily and, since my husband was already rich, I decided to devote my time to cultivating a garden, a perennial garden that spread over most of our lawn and looked wild but was not. I wanted children but in the meantime I would garden. I spent several months going over textbooks of perennials, consulting with gardeners and landscape artists, trying to come up with a mix of flowers that would somehow bloom year-round. I wanted the garden to be low-maintenance so that I could do all of the weeding and pruning myself, even after a child came. That was why I decided against planting roses.

My husband loved the idea of the garden. When he had time he went over plants with me. His favorite was a tricyrtis called sinonome. These were prized in Japan, tall, shiny, impressive as if they'd been painted. I planted several dozen of them. The garden, when it was finished, was wilder than I'd expected, like an enchanted forest out of a fairy tale. I'd forgotten to plan walkways. There were a few dirt paths that could be used for getting around the garden, but that was all. I hadn't even thought about fountains or statues, which I was embarrassed about afterwards – every great garden has a fountain. But my husband raved about the garden. He had his coworkers over to see it. "No one else has anything like it," he said, and it was true.

Two years into our marriage I had tests done and discovered I was infertile. My husband came out in the garden with me and sat by one of our favorite half-grown trees, a magnolia whose last blooms had just died. It was late August. He hugged me, and then admitted he was relieved. I looked at him, confused.

“You don’t want children,” I said.

“No,” he said. “I did. I thought I did. But I was never impatient, you know.”

I thought back on it, and it was true: we’d always made love in the same lazy way, never with any urgency or any sense of purpose. I guessed I was as guilty of that as he was. The garden kept me busy more than I’d expected. My gynecologist, not me, had suggested that I have tests done. I’d assumed there was still plenty of time – things still felt as if they were just beginning.

“But now that I know,” my husband said, “it seems – I don’t know – it wasn’t meant to be, maybe. We’ve got a great life.”

We did have a great life. I cried for a night or two, but then thought there was no reason things couldn’t just keep on as they’d been, for two more years, a decade, half a century. There was no reason we couldn’t be as happy as newlyweds forever. But I decided that if I couldn’t have a child, I would have roses. Instead of waiting until spring I ordered a greenhouse online, one that came in a box and that I would be able to assemble myself.

My mother, who had died a year before my marriage, grew prize roses, and I spent a lot of my childhood helping her fertilize and prune them. As early as February she had me pick out a bush I thought would produce the best rose that year, one that would be good enough to show at the Texas Rose Festival, and put me in charge of caring for it by myself, with no help or even advice from her. My roses never won – hers were always rounder, deeper in color – but as the

years passed I learned how to grow them larger and fuller, almost as perfect as hers. I couldn't imagine a life without roses. But my mother grew impossible roses, the hardest to work with, roses that took hours of maintenance a day, roses that had to be started in a greenhouse and then brought outside, roses that had to be flown in from across the country or overseas. She didn't have a garden, only roses. There was no time for anything else. If I hadn't been out working with the roses, I'd never have seen her.

The greenhouse I ordered was small, six by four feet, with a rust-resistant aluminum frame that had been painted a forest green. My husband offered to help me assemble it, but I wouldn't let him.

"I want complete control over my roses," I said.

"I'm not trying to help with the roses, just the greenhouse."

"You can't help me."

"Thank God we don't have a kid," he said.

"I'd have let you help with the kid."

"Maybe," he said. We were in the backyard, standing in a patch of dirt I'd had to clear for the greenhouse – we'd lost some azalea bushes, some monkey grass and lavender. My husband stretched and yawned, kissed me, and went inside. Alone, I opened the box and began pulling out sheets of reinforced glass, coated with something high-tech and scientific. All of a sudden I felt weak, and realized that I wasn't sure if I'd be able to get the greenhouse up myself. For a minute I considered calling my husband back, but decided against it, as if the roses demanded my sacrifice no less than a child would.

While I was still reading the instructions a cat appeared, a fat ginger with patchy fur, and rammed its head against my knee. I hadn't seen it approaching and I jumped, startled. It meowed

at me and rammed its head against my knee again, purring. I felt uneasy. We'd seen plenty of cats in our garden before – they were attracted to the moths and the lizards and the birds that lived there – but I'd never seen this particular cat, and none of the cats had ever approached us, even when we'd tried to lure them with food. But then, I thought, it was only a cat. I rubbed its head and continued reading the instructions, then began bolting the frame together. I had the frame up by nightfall. The cat was still there, still purring, and when I finally went inside I watched from the kitchen window as the cat hopped inside the open frame and curled up in the middle, its head tucked neatly between its paws.

Once the roses came I was in the greenhouse almost from dawn until dusk. I didn't need to be. Caring for the roses took perhaps twenty hours a week, and wouldn't have taken that long if I'd been less particular. But the greenhouse quickly became the most beautiful spot in our garden or our home. I'd ordered only Old Garden roses, varieties that had been bred before the 1860s. They had French names and there was one, *Soleil d'Or*, a hybrid tea rose, that even smelled faintly of oranges. And I grew my mother's favorite, *Charles de Mills*, a rose whose origins were unknown, deep crimson, with a pinwheel shape, as if it belonged in the hair of a bolero dancer. The *Charles de Mills* was all about show. My mother entered only her best rose in the competitions every year, but usually it was a *Charles de Mills*, not because they grew easier – in fact they were more difficult – but because she lavished care upon them, sometimes even singing to them. As a child I'd sometimes been jealous of that rose.

The ginger cat stayed in the greenhouse with me. In the mornings, after my husband left for work, before the sun had even quite risen, I came out to the greenhouse with a cup of coffee,

and the cat was there, meowing at the door to be let in. I didn't think it was strange. Everyone and everything, I thought, had to love my roses, even a cat. The roses were irresistible.

My husband agreed that the roses were beautiful, even sublime, the most impressive flowers he'd ever seen, and he stopped in every night after work to go over them with me, listening to me worry about spider mites and rotting roots, watching me prune. But when I suggested he invite his coworkers over to see it, he refused.

"Why?" I asked. "If they liked the garden, they'll be in love with this. The garden is nothing."

"I don't think they'd understand," he said.

"Understand? The roses? They're beautiful."

He frowned. "You're obsessed with them. I don't think they'd understand your obsession."

"I'm not obsessed."

"Honey," he said. "You are."

I was sitting in a plastic chair I kept in the greenhouse and the cat jumped into my lap and started meowing loudly, facing my husband, almost as if it were a guard dog protecting me.

"All I'm saying," my husband said, "and I think it's a good thing, a good outlet, but all I'm saying is that it's a little –"

The cat began to meow louder and deeper. I stroked its head, trying to calm it, but it ignored me.

"Shut that cat up," my husband said.

I pulled the cat closer to my chest. "Is that the way," I said slowly, "you would have talked to our child?"

“It’s a cat,” he said. He hesitated, then left.

From the greenhouse I watched him turn on the lights in the kitchen, saw him silhouetted against the curtains. The cat was calm now, purring gently. I stroked it absent-mindedly, wondering what it had been trying to protect me from, and why I’d been trying to protect it. It was just a cat. I hadn’t even bothered to figure out what sex it was, let alone give it a name. I wanted my husband to come back, hug me and take me inside. We hardly ever fought. But instead I sat with the cat until I saw the kitchen light turn off and the bedroom light turn on, then off again. Only then did I push the cat off my lap and go inside.

I never told my husband but I felt a certain pain every time I cut a bud from a rose bush. My mother had trained me to grow prize roses, which meant only one bloom could be allowed on a branch. A rose blooms to reproduce, she said, and you have to direct all its reproductive energy to one bloom, one giant and perfect bloom. The other buds, the pretenders, were swept into the compost. I didn’t mind sacrificing them but I did wonder, sometimes, watching the giant blooms grow, and knowing they’d only be cut in their turn and put in a vase, if it was all worth it.

The next week I went into the greenhouse early and found the cat dead, curled up in the middle of the ground as it’d been the first night I’d erected the frame. I didn’t know how it’d gotten into the greenhouse. I’d put it out the night before and the door was locked. I knew it was dead as soon as I saw it, but still I nudged it with my toe, hoping it would meow in protest. When it didn’t, I nudged it harder, and without meaning to I turned it over with my foot, so that its white stomach was exposed and its mouth fell open, trickling blood. Its eyes were open too, staring up at the glass ceiling, above which flew a crow. I sat down next to the cat and took it in my arms, wiping off its blood with the sleeve of my shirt and closing its eyes.

“There now,” I said. “It’s alright.”

Gradually the sun rose higher and the greenhouse became warmer. The birds, which had been loud in the early morning, quieted. Somewhere in the distance a cat meowed, low and threatening, and I jumped, thinking it was the ginger I held in my arms. Only then did I realize I’d been rocking the cat back and forth, as if it were a baby.

I put the cat down and stepped out of the greenhouse, leaning against its frame which burned my back through my shirt. Before me was the wild garden I’d planned, the ivy overgrown, most of the flowers wilted. I realized then that I hadn’t bothered to work in the garden since I’d bought the greenhouse. My husband must have noticed. I thought he was a saint for not telling me, for letting me stay in the greenhouse with the cat and the roses and the memories of my mother. I went inside and brewed a fresh pot of coffee and sat at the kitchen table and laid my head down so that my cheek was pressed against the cold wood. I forgot to drink the coffee. Eventually I fell asleep.

In my dreams I went back out with a shovel, intending to bury the cat, but when I entered the greenhouse the cat wasn’t there. I lay the shovel down and inspected the roses, one by one, as if I would find the cat hidden somehow between their petals. I thought I found one of its eyes in a Soleil d’Or, an ear in a Dudley Cross. I took the ear and the eye and put them in my pocket and kept looking for the other parts, the nose and the whiskers and each of its small teeth. Its paws were potted with the Maiden’s Blush. The last thing I found was its tail, curled around the best of my Charles de Mills like a vine, and in my dream I thought it was significant that the cat had chosen to leave its tail with my mother’s favorite rose, as if she and it were playing a joke on me in the afterlife. I laid the pieces of the cat out on the plastic floor and attempted to put them back together, sure that the cat could be resurrected. But instead the ears and nose and paws turned

into roots and reached through the plastic into the ground, then grew upwards into a stalk, separating into branches, at the ends of which bloomed five perfect Soleils d'Or which perfumed the greenhouse with the smell of oranges, dizzying, toxic, and I ran out of the greenhouse and to the magnolia tree, which I climbed, as if its browning leaves could save me.

When I woke my husband was sitting across the table from me, looking worried. He was still wearing most of a suit, but his sleeves were stained with dirt.

"I found the cat," he said.

I stiffened.

"I buried it by the magnolia tree. I'm sorry."

He reached across the table to take my hand.

I didn't go back to the greenhouse for two weeks. I let my husband hire a gardener to water and prune the roses and rehabilitate the wild garden, prepare it for the coming spring. I watched the gardener from the windows of the house. When I did finally go back to the greenhouse there was a new Soleil d'Or, placed next to the Charles de Mills, blooming roses that would've won gold at the Texas Rose Festival hands-down, no questions asked.

"The gardener wanted to surprise you," my husband said. "I told him to choose an orange rose, in memory of the cat."

I nodded. I felt sick. Instinctively I wanted the greenhouse bulldozed, the roses destroyed so that not even their roots remained. I felt claustrophobic.

"I was thinking," my husband said, "you're very talented. It might be good for you to start showing the roses competitively. Maybe sell them. It'd be constructive."

I nodded again. The roses were in good shape, each of them almost unbearably beautiful, as exquisite as a Faberge egg. I thought that if the cat had really chosen to be a rose in its afterlife, it'd chosen well. I shivered. I thought of the Greek gods whose lovers were turned into trees. I hated the Charles de Mills for not being my mother, the Soleil d'Or for not being the cat, all the rest for not being children. But like a lover, I had to take care of them. There was nothing else for me to do.

Mori

When I was younger I had a Japanese grandmother named Mori. She wasn't my grandmother but I didn't know what else to call her. She was the wife of my grandfather's best friend, a woman he'd met during the war and married before she knew five words of English. For a long time my family thought she was scamming the man, that he was, for her, nothing more than a way out of a country that had been bombed; all of her family had been killed during the war, her home was gone, and there was no reason to stay. But eventually we became convinced that she loved her husband, or at least didn't plan to leave him. Her husband was a weak man that my grandfather treated like a brother. If he loved Mori, the rest of my family felt obliged to love her too.

When I was in elementary school, my mother often worked at her office downtown until late in the evening, and it was Mori that met my bus after school and walked me up our long driveway and into our house. When night fell, Mori bathed me, using measuring cups to pour water over my hair to rinse out the shampoo, parting it perfectly with a comb, blowing it dry so that I wouldn't catch cold. Her hands were larger and rougher than my mother's, and stronger. She lifted me bodily out of the bathtub and toweled me roughly dry, until my skin was pink. I loved Mori. She tried, during these baths, when we were alone and had to pay attention to each

other, to teach me Japanese. She said I had a strong frame and would become a warrior.

“Capable of great things,” she said, her face as serious as stone.

But Mori wasn't the kind of woman to spoil a child. As soon as I was old enough to stay alone, she stopped coming. She never had children of her own, but she had other things to do just the same – she was a gambler, and went to an Indian reservation with a group of Japanese friends almost every weekend. During the week she spent her time on Ebay, bidding on porcelain baby dolls which she hoped would one day be of value. She watched the news, too, for hours at a time. She told me she thought bad things could only happen if no one was paying attention, so as long as she was watching, the world would be safe. When 9/11 happened, she was at the dentist's having a tooth pulled. For a long time I believed she really could have stopped it, just from the force of her gaze.

When I was twelve or thirteen Mori died, of some long-standing illness I'd never known about. By that time Mori and her husband had moved to a different city and I saw them only two or three times a year. I went to her funeral but didn't cry. I'd recently been kissed for the first time and was experimenting with stuffing my bra. I was trying to learn about jazz and I thought that when I became old enough I would start to smoke cigars from Cuba, and that one day I would go to Cuba, where I imagined everyone was beautiful and everyone had a gun.

It was in the spring of that year or the year after that I first met Mori's ghost. Somehow my mother and I had ended up at Mori's house, visiting her widowed husband; I don't remember when the trip had been planned or why, or whether or not I'd wanted to go. Mori's porcelain dolls stared down at us from display cases, each as delicate and pure as an angel. Mori's husband said he found them encouraging, and my mother and I exchanged glances. Early in the morning

he took us out to show us his garden, which he'd planted after Mori's death as a way to cope with the grief. The garden was filled with the usual things, tomatoes and lilies and hydrangeas. Mori had been fond of hummingbirds and her husband had erected a small army of little red feeders, filled with sugary water. If we'd stood still long enough we could have watch a hummingbird approach, but we didn't.

Over breakfast Mori's husband brought out a small fragment of bone, the size of a thumbnail, that he kept wrapped in a handkerchief in his pocket. It was Mori's bone, left over from the cremation. Everything else had been scattered in Japan – in her will she'd said she wanted to spend eternity with her family. We all knew that her husband had been hurt by this, and we felt sorry for him. The bone fragment looked like part of a broken sand dollar, something I would have rejected if I'd found it walking along a beach. Mori's husband smiled at my mother, over my head.

"We weren't supposed to take any of the bones," he said. "I snuck this one out."

"Sure," my mother said. "You wanted to keep a piece of her."

Mori's husband nodded, and smiled again, though soon after that he began to cry. My mother did her best to comfort him, pointing out that beautiful things still existed, the garden, the dolls, but he wouldn't stop crying. I took the breakfast dishes into the kitchen to get away from the crying and from the bone fragment, which made me shudder as if it were the discarded skin of a snake. But in the kitchen I looked over my shoulder, back into the dining room where Mori's husband sat sobbing, and I saw Mori. She looked younger, almost like one of her porcelain dolls, but she was nothing but a head and neck and a long, formless dress, as if she was little more than an unfinished sketch. She was looking at her husband with her lips pursed. I stood still for a few

seconds and Mori raised her eyes to meet mine. Lips still pursed, she shook her head. Then she disappeared.

In my mind, I began shaking violently from head to toe, and dropped the stack of plates I was holding, which broke into a thousand pieces, scattering over the wood floor; no one cleaned them up, and Mori's husband stepped on them and bled, became infected, cried like a baby in his misery. I played through this scenario four times before I realized I wasn't shaking; the plates were still in my hands; Mori's husband was still crying, but more quietly now. I turned and went into the kitchen. I was thirteen, or fourteen, and I had better things to think about. I wasn't dumb enough to tell anyone I'd seen a ghost. Soon we would go home.

I didn't see Mori again until my second year of college. During the intervening years I thought of her only when a family member mentioned her or when I saw her husband at holiday parties. When that happened I found myself remembering being lifted by her out of the tub, her arms as strong as Atlas, and I was filled with a sadness that confused me. Until I saw her ghost again I assumed I'd made it up. Later I thought maybe she'd left me alone because until college she'd figured my life was going okay. Other times I thought it was because she only visited her husband, until he died and there was no longer any need. I never asked her. I doubt she would have answered.

It was a Saturday night. I had stayed home from a party to sleep and then found I couldn't sleep. I sat in the kitchen with one lamp burning. I'd made a cup of tea but hadn't drunk it. I couldn't see anything through the kitchen windows but I could hear muted music, my neighbors laughing, the occasional siren in the distance.

Mori's ghost appeared suddenly, floating by the kettle on the stove. I was too tired to be surprised. Her ghost was small but seemed noble, far nobler she'd seemed in life. Her face was as smooth and translucent as glass and her hair was long and white. Her body was still only yards of flowing fabric, patterned with tiny birds which seemed to move but didn't.

"Do you want some tea?" I asked.

She shook her head gently and I heard wind chimes jingling outside.

"I like coffee," she said.

"I thought you drank tea."

She sighed and her mouth puckered. For a moment I thought I saw the deep wrinkles around her lips and eyes that she'd had in life, but then they were gone.

"If I'd been your mother," she said, "I'd have taught you better manners."

"Well," I said.

"Besides, you watched me drink coffee plenty of times."

"I was a kid. I don't remember." I felt bad about offending her, but there was something severe in her voice that prevented me from apologizing.

"Sure," she said. "Look, you were a wonderful kid. Promising. I expected a lot from you."

I shrugged. "So did I," I said. "That's not how life goes."

"Don't be smart."

I lowered my eyes, then nodded. I was sorry. If I could have chosen a relationship to have with Mori's ghost, it would've been the one in which she bathed me, and told me that I had a strong frame and would be a strong woman. It would be a relationship in which her strong arms were around me, lifting me up out of the bath. I didn't want to fight her.

“Why are you here?” I asked, as gently as I could.

“My husband is dying,” she said, the hardness in her voice gone.

That only raised more questions, but I found I couldn’t ask any of them, as if, not wanting to be disturbed by my ignorance, she’d cast a spell. So once again I nodded. I didn’t have any coffee, for which I apologized. Mori and I sat comfortably in silence until I felt calm and light-headed and thought it would be easy to collapse into the darkness. At two in the morning my housemates came home and my cup of tea had gone cold; Mori’s ghost was gone. I slept the next day until one in the afternoon, when my mother called to tell me Mori’s husband had died in his sleep.

I had been going through a kind of depression during those months. The girls I lived with were tall and had dark and expressive eyebrows. Every week one or the other of them came home with a new pair of earrings or a faux-silk shirt. They were sparkling people that I didn’t understand. My professors treated me with respect but disliked my ideas; I was told I didn’t understand academic logic, that I needed to read the canon, that there was already a theory for what I was trying to say. I felt frustrated, like a hamster after a night on its wheel. Looking back I think the professors were tired people living tired lives. The library on campus was sprawling, a labyrinth, and several times I turned a corner to find a view of the university I’d never seen before, the roofs of the buildings unfolding one after the other for what seemed like miles, as if there had never been anything beyond them.

I was failing. I’d planned to study engineering but I hadn’t gotten more than a C in any of the required classes, and my advisor wouldn’t even let me declare the major. She suggested English or history, something that wouldn’t require too much analytical thought. She said some

people needed time in the sun on the quad to survive, and that I was one of these people, and that engineers didn't have time for sun in the quad. As if I were a flower.

I stayed in the library, wandering from study room to study room, trying to absorb the calculus in the books. As a child I'd been good at math but I assumed the talent had disappeared sometime around puberty. Occasionally, alone in the study rooms, I tried doing pushups or sit-ups, testing my strength. I had the same solid frame I'd had when Mori had bathed me, but there was no muscle on it, just short thick bones that refused to support me. Then I laid on the study room floors, hoping for sleep. In the corners I often saw condoms, opened and used, and I wondered how a person could use their body that way in a place like this. I had sex rarely, and only in the dark.

The afternoon of Mori's husband's death I went for a walk. It was a classical day, blue skies, and I had a few hours before I needed to begin the long drive home. On the corner of the last street before the university a man who smelled like urine grabbed my arm and asked for change.

"No," I said.

"Wait," he said. He let go of my arm and grabbed my hand. "You look like you could use some help."

I looked at him, wondering whether I should try to pull my hand away or simply wait until he'd said his peace.

"We all need help sometimes," he said. "The world would be a better place if we all helped each other."

I nodded slowly, wondering if the man had a mental illness.

“For example,” he said. “Young thing like you, I bet you could use some hot...hot...sex.”

I pulled my hand away and watched as the man bent over with laughter. All of a sudden I felt exhausted. My body was as heavy as lead. I was amazed that I continued to stand.

“I’m twenty years old,” I said.

“You saying you’re not a woman yet?”

“I’m not saying anything.”

The man laughed some more. “You run on home to your mom then,” he said.

“You go to hell,” I said, without knowing I was saying it. It wasn’t something I normally would have said. I looked around quickly, panicked, hoping there would be a witness in case the man took offense and became violent. I realized my hands were balled into fists. Across the road I thought I saw Mori’s ghost, laughing, but it was a sunny day and there was a glare; besides, I thought Mori should have been with her husband’s corpse just then, instead of in my college town.

The man looked me up and down, started to say something, and then walked away, talking softly to himself. There was a bench nearby and I made my way over to it and sat down with my head between my knees until the sun sank low enough to cover the bench in shadow and I grew cold.

When I had just started middle school I was assigned a paper in which I was to write about my hero. I didn’t have a hero. My mother told me to interview Mori for the paper; she said Mori was an original person and that her story might be worth knowing. I prepared a long list of questions and took them to Christmas Eve dinner and approached Mori, shyly, after dessert.

She told me, at the beginning of our interview, that if she could have done anything with her life she'd have owned a candy shop. "My sister loved lemon drops," she said. "I wanted a place where she could eat as many as she wanted, for free." I don't remember the words she used to describe the candy shop but I remember the way it would have looked, the candies sorted in rainbow order, glowing in glass jars, the wooden floor swept clean, children milling about with wonder in their eyes; and since it was a dream, there were no obese or broken children and nobody's hands were sticky; it was a happiness machine.

"We were rich," she said, "when we were little. Then the war happened." She stopped talking then and appeared to become lost in the movie that was playing on the TV behind me.

"Tell her about the war," my mother said, who was sitting close by.

"Oh," she said. "I didn't notice it until my dad was killed. He was a general, you know. Very important. After he died we lost our home. I remember sometimes we had to eat trash. It was difficult. My brother died. Then my sister. There wasn't enough food."

She told me about the bombs and the stray dogs and the neighbors who disappeared. She knew I was a child but she didn't keep the details from me. She described her siblings' deaths accurately. I tried to look in her eyes but all I could see was my own head filling her irises, and I had to look away.

"I wouldn't be strong without the war," she said. She paused and for a long moment no one said anything.

The implication, which I picked up on even then, was that I didn't know anything; I shouldn't pity her; I wasn't strong, even though she'd always said I would be.

Mori's husband was a Christian, and was buried next to my grandfather in the cemetery of his church, thousands of miles away from Mori's ashes in Japan. The ceremony was simple, open-air, and nobody mentioned Mori, as if they were afraid of admitting that her absence was most likely what had killed him. The next day my mother and I went to his house to begin packing up his things. The porcelain dolls were still there, coated with a thick layer of dust behind their glass walls. I felt uneasy looking at them, as if they might come to life and attack.

"Why did Mori buy all of these?" I asked.

My mother laughed. "She hated them too," she said. "She just thought they'd be worth money." She paused and frowned. "I guess she was too far gone by the time they were valuable enough to sell. She must've forgotten."

I nodded. Together we placed each doll in its original box and packed up the china. Almost everything else – their clothes, souvenirs from vacations – we threw away. I found Mori's bone fragment, the one her husband had stolen, in his bedside table, still wrapped in its handkerchief. I unwrapped it and turned it over in my hands, no longer disgusted by it, though I couldn't have said why. I pretended I could tell it had faded in color since the last time I'd seen it, but that was impossible to know. On instinct I slipped it into my pocket before my mother came into the room. I didn't think I deserved it, but then there was no one left alive who did. And I wanted it – suddenly, violently, as if I were being held at gun point and the bone was the only talisman that could get me out alive.

"Why didn't they have kids?" I asked my mother as she drove us home.

"Mori wouldn't," she said. "She didn't think the world was good enough for children."

"She didn't?"

“No,” my mother said, without answering the real question. “They fought about it for years. Eventually he gave up.”

We rode in silence then, and I watched the houses go by – each identical, low and unassuming, set far back on its acre lot. I began to feel a deep sadness that a woman like Mori had lived in a place like this.

When we were almost home, my mother said, “When you were born, they joked about adopting you. Mori said the world had made a mistake. You were really her daughter. You just got mixed up and landed in my womb.”

“Why would she say that,” I said slowly, “if she didn’t want a daughter?”

My mother shrugged. “She loved you.”

“Then why did she stop coming over? She was always gambling.”

My mother frowned. “Don’t do that,” she said. “Mori loved you, and that’s all.”

I looked at her, and fingered Mori’s bone in my pocket, trying not to cry.

When I returned to my small college house I locked myself in my room and lay Mori’s bones on my bed. My comforter was new and white and the bone fragment blended in so that it seemed to fade in and out of existence, the way Mori’s ghost had done. I took the fragment in my hand and shook it and let it fall, as if I were rolling a die. Mori had liked to gamble so much. I used to think she believed in fate. But the fragment of bone lay flat, not even glinting in the light.

“Mori,” I said, thinking, maybe, that I could summon her, that she would be attracted by the scent of her own bone – surely, being dead, she missed the feel of bone. “Mori, Mori.”

A draft of air passed over my neck. I turned, but there was nothing there.

Eventually I fell asleep, curled tightly in one corner of the bed, the fragment of bone clasped tightly in my fist. I slept fitfully and imagined the bone multiplied until there were a hundred fragments, and small luminescent fairies flitted above my bed, trying to steal the fragments away; in my dreams I swatted at them like mosquitoes and was stung, as if they were bees. Then Mori's ghost came, metamorphosed into a long piece of rough silk fabric, and settled over the bones the way a mist obscures the sea. I woke briefly and thought I saw the hundred bone fragments glowing on my bed. I wanted to know whether this magic was something that had existed my entire life, and if it was, how I could have been so long in noticing it.

The next morning was Monday. I rose early and ate Ritz crackers for breakfast and tried to begin work on a paper. After I'd eaten all of the Ritz crackers and written five words I gave up, emailed my professors and said I'd be absent that day, claiming grief. Then I went for a walk. The light was just past a gray dawn. Trucks were out, making deliveries to the stores, ice cream and crates of bread and Coke. I watched the men unloading the trucks, pushing dollies up ramps, their forearms bulging. They spoke to each other in grunts. If I'd been Mori's daughter, would I be one of these men? The thought was absurd and I dismissed it. Then I saw Mori's ghost floating among them, drifting gently along as if propelled by the breeze the men's movements created. She waved at me.

I'd come then to another bench at another bus stop. I sat down. Mori's ghost drifted over to me.

"You're sitting on my bone," she said.

I jumped up and pulled the wadded handkerchief out of my back pocket. I opened it and looked inside: the fragment was intact. Still, I felt guilty.

“I’m a terrible person,” I said. “I shouldn’t have this.”

“I saw you almost punch that homeless man the other day,” Mori said.

“I wasn’t going to punch him.”

“You were,” Mori said. The silk of her body rippled violently, as if she were trying to pump a phantom fist in the air. “It would’ve been like this,” she said, “hoo-rah!” She laughed.

“Mori,” I said. “I’m not that person. I’m sorry.”

She sighed. “You know what you need?”

I shook my head.

“Sex! The man was right. It’d be good for you.”

I stared at her, my mouth open. I wanted to tell her to shut up but I couldn’t. She laughed at me and floated for a while on her back, watching the clouds.

Eventually she said, more gently, “I didn’t get to marry an American because I was a prude. Your body is like a weapon, kid.”

“I didn’t think you were like that,” I said.

“I didn’t think you were a pussy.”

I stared at the bone fragment in my lap, then looked away. Across the road the men were still working, moving sluggishly but strongly. I wondered how early they’d gotten up, when they’d gone to bed, who they’d slept with. I thought of waking at four in the morning and it seemed like an austere life, and for a moment that appealed to me.

Then I remembered watching Mori bathe as a child, a scene I’d forgotten. I was perhaps two or three. Mori had been dressed in a silk dress that was wrapped tight around her body, and her eyes were heavily lined with black. She had just gotten home from a friend’s wedding, or a party or a dinner. She sat me on the toilet so she could keep an eye on me as she bathed. Then

she scrubbed the eyeliner from her eyes, revealing a dull face with a strong jaw and eyes so focused they could keep a plane from being hijacked. When she took her dress off I was surprised at the width and firmness of her body, at the muscles in her arms. She'd always seemed so tiny. She turned to look at me.

"This is what a woman looks like, kid," she'd said, and laughed.

At the bus stop I looked up at Mori's floating head, her formless silk robe. I wondered how much it'd pained her to die and lose her body. Then I wondered how none of us had ever realized how powerful of a body she'd possessed.

"You used to say I'd grow up to be a warrior," I said. "Not a whore."

"First of all," she said, "same thing. Second of all, I didn't tell you to be a whore."

"Well," I said. "Still."

"You can't be an engineer," she said. "That's clear."

"That's not fair," I said. "I'm studying. It'll be fine."

"With a body like yours, you should be in sports medicine. Or drop out and learn karate. Or be a sailor."

I didn't want to be a sailor or a karate instructor. I told her so. "And I'm not you're daughter," I said, immediately regretting it, realizing I would've liked to be her daughter.

"No," she said. "You aren't. I wouldn't have raised you to be a spoiled coward, like your mother did."

I stared at her, suddenly angry. In my mind I slapped her, but in the real world I understood that I couldn't slap a ghost.

"Anyway," she said, "bulk up. There's a war coming."

"There's no war," I said, "and I'm not a soldier."

“I didn’t say you were a soldier,” she said. “I said bulk up. I had a war too. You remember that. I wasn’t strong until after the war. That was a mistake. Things could have been so different.”

I stared at her. Behind her, on the other side of the road, a group of ROTC students was on a run, chanting something threatening, or encouraging, depending on how you looked at it. I considered the possibility that they were my future, and shivered.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “It won’t be like that. That’s not what I mean.”

“What will it be like?”

“Awful.”

“Mori,” I said. “What’s going to happen?”

“You’ll grow up,” she said. “That’s all.”

I kept watching the runners, trying to separate individuals from the crowd, but the crowd was thick and moved together. I had a headache. I wanted Mori to leave, for her to be an imaginary friend I could make disappear at will, as if she’d never existed. For a moment her bone repulsed me as it had done when I was a child. I squeezed it in my hand, either for comfort or in an attempt to crush it. I closed my eyes.

When I opened my eyes, the ROTC students and Mori had gone, and the air around me felt stale and still. The men were getting back into their trucks, starting the engines. I fought the urge to chase after them, to ask them to take me with them, to let me share their austere lives, program delivery addresses into the GPS, drive in circles day after day. I knew I wouldn’t go to class that day, or the day after. I rubbed my arms, feeling the small biceps there, wondering how large they could become. I felt my life was about to change, in none of the ways I’d wanted it to – but then, Mori hadn’t wanted a war.

News

I had some news to tell him so I made some hot chocolate with Nutella just before he came over, and poured some brandy in his, more than other people would've liked, but that was how he liked it – not because he liked the taste of brandy but, as he often said when he was drunk, because he liked being able to take more than other people. He liked being strong, and he was; once, for a fundraiser, he'd bench pressed three very thin women in front of a live audience. He had a deep and accented voice and called me his ballerina, not because I danced or was delicate but because, he said, I was elegant and very feminine, which in my opinion was a lie.

I had to tell him that I was moving to New Zealand, which for me was only a place very far away with hot Christmases and kangaroos. I'd gotten a job there which I had to accept. It was impossible for him to come with me, not because he couldn't have found work in New Zealand but because he didn't belong there, and I was afraid he would wilt in the heat like a rose. He was strong but he wasn't adaptable. If he'd been a plant or a bird he would've been endangered long ago, his needs too specific, his skills too narrow.

He arrived at exactly eight, as he always did on Mondays. I was wearing a silk robe that I let fall open as I let him in.

"Hello, ballerina," he said, as he kissed me and squeezed one of my breasts; then he walked into the kitchen and picked up a mug of hot chocolate.

“Wrong one,” I said, and handed him the right one.

“Mmmm,” he said. “Smells strong.”

He sat heavily in a folding chair.

“Long day?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said. “Always.”

He worked for a moving company and sometimes joked that I liked him for this reason: he was poor. I was a translator and should have been poor but one of the first books I’d translated, a Latin American memoir about growing up during a war and being metaphorically and literally raped, had unexpectedly made the bestseller list, and then my uncle had died; all any of that meant was that I could afford silk bathrobes and real Nutella instead of the off-brand and felt a little more stately than I had previously. And now there was this new job, which would involve vacation days and a retirement account, things neither of us had been able to imagine before.

“Listen,” he said. “I was looking up about that sex position we tried the other night and I think I figured out how to make it work.”

“I’m on my period,” I said.

“Oh,” he said.

I sat down across from him and for a minute we looked at each other, both of us smiling, our mugs clasped in our hands. I had no doubt we were in love. When we went out in public together people assumed we were rich and seemed happy to watch us. We looked, and were, healthy and strong.

“I was thinking it’s time to buy real chairs,” I said.

He looked around at the back of his folding chair, which was striped with bright yellow and blue.

“Seems like a fine chair to me,” he said.

“You get much stronger you’ll break it.”

He grinned. “You’re flattering me,” he said.

A couple of nights previously I’d found out about the job I had to take and had been sitting on it ever since. It was the kind of news that changes a life and I wouldn’t have much choice about buying new chairs after I told him. A person with a retirement account couldn’t have beach chairs in her kitchen. But our life – perhaps I was mistaken to call it ours – had its established rhythms, its pleasures; Sundays we always woke up together and for two months straight the sky had held its rain on Sundays, so that the dust danced in the sunlight coming through the blinds and he asked me to dance too, and I did dance because we were in love and I felt buoyed up by the sunlight, floating. All of that was so fragile, like the smooth brown skin of an egg.

“You ever seen a Faberge egg?” I asked, and moved to the refrigerator to get out some mushrooms and eggs.

“In books,” he said.

“They’re breathtaking.”

“Sure,” he said, “but so are tomatoes, if you look at them right.”

I laughed, and dug a pan out of the lower cabinets.

“What’re you making?” he asked.

“Omelets.”

I poured oil in the pan to heat and whisked the eggs in a bowl. I had my back to him, and was looking at the painting above my stove, which the previous owners of the house had left. In the painting a black dog pulled a red wagon along the shore of a pond. It wasn't an impressionist painting but it belonged somewhere in that class, and I was fond of it.

"I was thinking of buying you a music box," he said. "One that has a ballerina that pops up and dances to the music."

"Why would you buy me something like that?"

He shrugged.

I sautéed the mushrooms and felt the hair on my neck curling a little from the heat. On Sundays, after we woke, we went for a walk around the town. There was a dog, a black one like the one in the painting, that was usually walked by its owner around the same time, and if we timed it right we could watch it chasing a ball in the park. We never said we wanted to own that dog but we held each other when we watched it and it had become, for me, an emblem of the future we would have together if everything had played out right.

"I was thinking of buying you a Faberge egg," I said.

I'd expected him to laugh but instead he was silent. I turned to look at him and he set his hot chocolate down on the table and stared determinedly at the floor.

"I was thinking of buying you a ring," he said.

I turned back and poured the eggs in the pan and watched the air bubbles pop. I couldn't breathe. In the painting the dog was turned away from me, trotting into the cheery distance. For the hundredth time I wondered why he was pulling the red wagon, who had yoked him to it. I thought, sadly, that I should leave the painting with the house when I left, which would be soon. I would've liked to have married him and lived with him there until dementia set in, and I

would've liked to buy a puppy that would chew holes through my slippers. But there was no point in saying any of that. I couldn't turn my back on ambition just because I was in love.

"I have some news," I said, wishing I hadn't made the omelet, which sizzled happily, obscenely, on the stove.

House with a Picket Fence

For a few weeks Carl and I lived together in a house with a white-picket fence. The fence had been there before we moved in but we cared enough to give it a fresh coat of paint, and we planned, in the spring, to keep up the lilacs and tulips the previous owner had planted. The previous owner had been an old man, the librarian for the math department at the nearby university, never married, childless, and he'd died alone in his sleep. We felt sorry for him and didn't want his flowers to die. I was also superstitious about it, afraid somehow that if we displeased his spirit we would also each die alone, ridiculous divorcees living in separate condominiums, having failed at online dating and singles groups, our children, if we had any, long since estranged.

We moved there just after we were married. Before we'd lived in a city where we'd hosted our share of cocktail parties in an apartment, and worked freelance from coffee shops, and done without a fireplace when it snowed. It was the thought of a fireplace that pushed Carl to suggest a move. When he was younger his family had owned a woodstove, and he had some memories of hacking trees down in a woods somewhere in the January cold. He said, and I believe he was being sincere, that those memories were spiritual, and he missed them. I, for my part, wanted a child, and was afraid of that child falling out of sixth-story windows, exploring the fire escapes, not knowing how to climb a tree – for which, I thought, irrationally, he would be

bullied in school; surely the other children would have learned during summer trips to relatives in the country, surely our child would be somehow abnormal, unbalanced. We bought the house before our lease was up; a cousin of the old man's sold it for nothing, and left us his dishes and bath curtains as they were, to save himself the bother of sorting through them.

That was in early December, before winter had quite set in. We spent the weeks before Christmas going through the attic and the linen closets, throwing out only the things we felt sure the old man would have no longer wanted – towels with holes in them, unraveling wicker baskets, a box of rusty nails. I found an antique bassinet in the attic, which we kept. I thought the old man had slept in it himself as an infant; Carl said it was more likely he'd simply stored it for a friend after their child had outgrown it, and forgotten about it. I brought it down and set it in the spare bedroom and spent the afternoon polishing it, and silently thanked the old man for leaving it behind.

The first snow fell during the first week of January and Carl, taken off guard, began searching Craigslist for woodstoves, and calling around to see where firewood might be bought, and if there was anywhere he could cut it for free. There wasn't; there were plenty of woods around, but they all belonged to insular families or to corporations that intended one day to develop them. We'd heard that the university sometimes let people take trees that had been marked out as diseased in their woods, but when we called they said that policy was only for low-income employees; anyway, I told Carl, we didn't want diseased wood, which could have been a bad omen. In the end, we bought three bundles of wood from Food Lion and some newspaper from Starbucks, and built a fire in the naked fireplace, assuming the inspector would have told us if the chimney was blocked or somehow damaged.

I made hot chocolate. Carl sat by the fire, fanning the fire with a bellows we'd found in the storage shed out back. I added peppermint schnapps to our hot chocolate and sat the mugs on the rickety rough-hewn table that sat in front of the couch. My bet was that the old man had made the table himself, had been proud of it for a while and then realized it was terrible; Carl said I was too pessimistic and that it'd been made by a boy scout trying to win a prize for helping the elderly. Carl pumped the bellows a few times and adjusted some twigs. His face was red from the heat.

"Come here," I said, sitting on the couch.

Carl grinned and came to sit beside me. "Peppermint schnapps?" he asked, picking up one of the mugs.

"Mhm."

"Look at that fire," he said. "First one I've made in ten years."

"It's a nice fire."

"I didn't even look up how to stack the logs on Youtube. My hands remembered."

I watched him drink his hot chocolate, which took perhaps half a minute. Carl always drank beverages this quickly and seemed confused when I pointed it out, as if he hadn't noticed or didn't know beverages could be consumed in any other way. He slurped, like an animal. Sometimes this attracted me to him and sometimes it repulsed me. That night I was cold and grateful to him for making the fire, and was not repulsed at all.

"More?" I asked.

"Maybe just some schnapps," he said. "Or beer."

I brought my legs up to rest in his lap and looked at the fire. Automatically he began to rub my calves and feet, as if I was a cat that needed to be petted. It was a hot fire, burning a light

and pleasant orange. Somewhere a twig snapped and the logs settled and shifted. Carl moved to get up.

“It’s fine,” I said. “Let’s just sit here.”

For a while we watched the fire, which burned down and cooled a little but didn’t stop jumping and licking. Like Carl, I’d gone several years without seeing a real fire and I’d forgotten how difficult it could be to look away. The chimney hadn’t caught fire so I imagined the old man must have kept it clean and burned his own fires, and I felt warmly connected to him and to all other people who made and watched fires, even cavemen and, I supposed, Adam and Eve once they’d been evicted from Eden. Carl’s face was just beginning to wrinkle around the corners of his eyes and, in profile, with the flames making his cheeks glow, he looked like a man capable of great things, a man who could become a venerated leader, one with real wisdom. He looked serious and I loved him.

“Carl,” I said.

He grunted a little.

“Let’s make a baby.”

He turned and smiled at me. “We will,” he said.

“Now.”

“Not now,” he said. “I’m too comfortable.”

Carl had never been too comfortable before, but at the time I didn’t make anything of it. I just smiled at him dumbly. I couldn’t see outside from where we were sitting but I guess it must have been snowing heavily for some time by then, and I knew it’d grown dark. I pulled a blanket over from the other end of the couch and tucked it around our legs.

“Tell me about when you used to cut wood,” I said, “with your family.”

“It was fun,” he said. “We took the dog with us and he went crazy. Normally there was already a dead tree lying around somewhere and all we had to do was cut it up.”

“You said it was spiritual.”

“I guess it was.”

He was still looking at the fire and I could tell he was breathing slowly. He didn’t tell me in what way cutting wood had been spiritual. I thought he must be getting tired. I thought I could see his wrinkles growing deeper and his hair graying, becoming an old man like the one who had died here before us, but not stooped, still proud, never suffering from dementia, taking pills for mild arthritis, gardening out back, repainting the fence, showing kindness to the boy scout who lived next door.

“Carl,” I said.

He was silent.

“You’re going to be a beautiful old man,” I said, “one day, after we’ve raised the children.”

“The children,” he said.

I waited.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said. “All this junk that the man left. It’s not much, is it?”

“No,” I said slowly. “I wouldn’t say it’s an excessive amount.”

“Sure fills up the house though,” he said.

I nodded, though I didn’t know what he meant. To me the house seemed comfortable, the way a house that’s seen a life should be. I thought about asking Carl what he meant but I sensed he didn’t want to explain, and I thought maybe it was time we’d learned to communicate in this way, with half-finished thoughts, like couples who’d been married for many years. Then I felt

ashamed that I didn't understand him. In a minute I pulled away, picked up our empty mugs and took them into the kitchen. When I returned Carl hadn't moved.

"Let's go to bed," I said.

"You go on up," he said. "I'll put some more wood on the fire."

"Carl," I said. "Please."

When I'd first started sleeping over at his place, before we were married, I'd told him that as a child my older sister had told me about the monsters living under my bed, terrifying purple creatures with teeth the size of fingers and tongues covered in algae. I still had a slight residual fear of going to bed alone, an almost unconscious discomfort that sometimes made it hard to sleep. When I'd admitted this to Carl he'd laughed affectionately, taken my face in his hands and promised me that if it was within his power he'd always go to bed with me so that I wouldn't be alone.

Now Carl just sat staring at the fire. "I'll be up in a minute," he said. "You'll be fine."

I tried to think of something to say and couldn't. For a long minute I stood there, watching him watch the fire, wondering if he'd forgotten my confession or if he was trying to make me feel like a child. I couldn't understand either way. Eventually I gave up and went upstairs alone.

By the time I'd washed my face Carl was upstairs with me, brushing his teeth and deliberating on whether it was cold enough to wear the pajamas his mother had bought him for Christmas. I wanted to give him a cold shoulder, refuse to touch him, but in the end I was scared of provoking an argument and we fell asleep holding each other, the way we always did and assumed we always would, though our older married friends told us we would grow out of it, re-

learn to appreciate personal space and cool sheets. In the morning Carl was gone and the fire had died down to its last embers. I made eggs and waited out the morning and afternoon, then drove into town to have a cup of tea in a public place. When I returned home Carl had come home with a truck.

“Where’s your Toyota?” I asked.

“I traded it in,” he said. “If we’re going to cut our own wood we need a way to transport it.”

He was grinning and bouncing on his toes. He often did this when he was excited, and I’d always found it charming, but just then I found it childish, and I wanted to grab him by his shoulders and force him to be still.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked.

“It’s a surprise.”

“I didn’t want a truck. I was worried.”

He stopped grinning. “Don’t be like that,” he said. “Don’t ruin things.”

I shook my head at him. “There’s nowhere to cut wood anyway,” I said. “We already looked.”

Then Carl smiled, slowly, in a sly way I’d never seen before. Surprised, I found myself fighting an urge to back away.

“That’s another surprise,” he said. “I found a place, a few miles out of town. It’s got ten acres of woods. Lot of hardwoods left in there, it’s never been mined. We’d have enough wood for a hundred winters. We could sell the hardwoods too. They’re not cheap, you know.”

“We have a house,” I said. “This is our house.”

“I don’t think,” he said slowly, “that I can live here.”

I stared at him. I didn't ask him why. He was looking away from me, picking at the loose threads at the ends of his sleeves. In later years I would wonder if he'd really been talking about the house, or if he'd been talking about me, and I regretted not asking him. But at the moment I felt it didn't matter. I just looked at Carl with a growing sadness, realizing we were nothing like the married couples I knew, that the life I'd thought we'd agreed upon could slip away in one afternoon as if it'd never had any weight at all.

The old man had owned very few nice things and those nice things he did own, like the bassinet, were the ones that hadn't fit into his life and had, I assumed, come to him only by chance or mistake. The kitchen table had been sanded, but not enough. His towels were threadbare, his plates cracked, his silverware tarnished. When we'd moved in it'd already been five years at least since the picket fence had gotten a fresh coat of paint. The old man, I thought, had lived a shell of a life, been thrifty for no reason, left his estate to a pair of mismatched strangers. But he'd had a nice garden, and maybe that was enough. I lived in that house for several years after Carl left, weeding among the old man's lilacs. It was a quiet street and the neighbors were kind.

Uncle

My husband and I lived on the main street of a small town owned by the university where my husband taught philosophy. Our house was small, pink, and needed new windows. Sometimes people in uniforms, ROTC students, walked by our house, and I considered a life like theirs: disciplined, strong, a sailor's cap perched on my head, medals on my chest glinting in the early spring sun. Out back I had a vegetable garden where, all winter, I dug up carrots and potatoes and five varieties of radishes. At that time I was becoming fond of cabbage – it was cheap and hardy, almost as nutritious as kale. My husband complained but ate the cabbage anyway.

In November my uncle came to visit. When I was a child he used to follow me into the bathroom to watch me go, and sometimes did more than watch. As I got older I became practiced at avoiding him, and he was anyway only around for holidays and parties. When I was a child people said he was handsome but by that November he was an old man with liver spots and the beginning of a hunched back. I'd been out grocery shopping and when I came home my husband and uncle were on the porch sharing a pot of coffee and listening, I assumed, to my uncle's war stories. My uncle had never been in a war but he told war stories anyway, maybe stories that'd been told to him during his four years of service in the navy, eternal stories that could have

attached themselves to any war: women with buoyant breasts, women named Candy, women with identical twins. When my husband saw me he shrugged his shoulders in apology.

“You should leave,” I said to my uncle.

“I wanted to tell you something,” he said.

“You should leave,” I repeated. I felt paralyzed and wished my husband would come to support me; I couldn’t think of anything more convincing to say.

“I’ve got leukemia,” my uncle began.

I shook my head. If I’d been ten years younger I’d have put my fingers in my ears. We’d known about his leukemia for eight months; there had been a chain of family phone calls, unavoidable. I’d told my husband there would be no flowers, no cards, and my husband hadn’t argued.

Slowly my uncle smiled, then stood and put a baseball cap on his head. “Sure,” he said. “You’re right. It’s getting on to supper time.”

My husband came to stand behind me at last, his hands on my shoulders.

“Keep warm this winter,” my uncle said, as he made his way down the porch steps.

My husband nodded politely. My uncle walked down the driveway to his car.

“I didn’t know what to do,” my husband said that night, as he was doing the dishes. “I didn’t want to kick him out.”

I looked away from him. I was holding a full glass of wine. We’d had cabbage again that night, baked into a quiche, along with rose-colored radishes. It’d been too salty but my husband, feeling guilty, ate three servings.

“He’s really getting old,” he said. “He said there won’t be a relapse. Did you see how he was walking hunched over? He’s harmless.”

“He isn’t harmless,” I said.

My husband winced. Normally I would have helped him with the dishes, but instead I sat there, contemplating my wine. Later my husband carried me to bed and tucked me in as if I was a child, and the next morning he brought me white roses.

On Tuesday I went to a used furniture shop downtown, behind the university, a few streets past the Qdoba beyond which the college students never ventured. It was a quiet place that smelled like mold and mothballs. I went there often, and knew each piece of furniture, the arm chairs covered in faded velvet, the floral-patterned couches, the wicker stools, the headboards pushed into one corner. Very occasionally an item sold and the shop owner and I mourned its loss together. There was never anything new. The shop owner was a few years older than me, with dark hair and an angular face; she said the collection of furniture was originally her mother’s, and that she sold it because she didn’t know what else to do.

“You should take the chair,” she said as I walked in. “The Edwardian with the plaid seat.”

She was referring to a chair I’d considered many times, absently running my hands over its cutout back while I surveyed the couches behind it. I wandered over to it now and sat carefully, crossing my ankles and folding my hands in my lap.

“It feels stiff,” I said. “What would I do with it?”

“Read a book,” she said. “Meditate.” She turned away from me to enter something in her ledger; I suspected she was writing down the price of the chair, as if I’d already bought it.

“Where did your mother get all of this furniture?” I asked.

She shrugged, smiled. “She was a hoarder,” she said. “She was rich. The chair suits you. You’re like kindred souls.”

I gripped the arms of the chair and imagined sitting in it while I was told some life-changing news, interrogating my unborn children on their boyfriends and curfews, holding court. I shifted, uncomfortable. My husband I usually bought furniture that was overstuffed, or had broken springs, so that we sank deep into our couches and loveseats, surrendering our thighs to the goose feathers. But the chair had a certain aesthetic appeal. I paid the woman a dollar for it and carried it home, past the stream of students smoking between classes, staring at me like I was a lost soul, a foreigner who still mumbled to herself in Russian or Czech, if she had a language at all.

When I got home there was a message on the answering machine, which was rare since my husband and I had acquired first email and then texting. I put water on the stove to boil for tea and pressed *play* and began humming something to myself, a song I’d made up as a child and remembered sometimes when I was alone.

“I don’t want to make out like it’s about me,” my uncle’s voice said, its timbre made staticky by the answering machine.

In my confusion I placed my hand on the hot stove eye, and when I lifted it I could see the beginnings of a welt.

“I guess there aren’t ever the right words for it,” my uncle continued. “When a man’s told he hasn’t got much time left to live,”

I cursed, trying to decide between walking to the sink to run my hand under cool water or walking to the answering machine to turn it off.

“I wasn’t in my right mind, back then,” he said.

I turned towards the sink and then towards the answering machine. My uncle’s voice kept rolling, taking its time with the vowels, as if he felt it was important that his tongue caress every sound. I couldn’t understand his words. In a panic I grabbed the answering machine, unplugging it from the wall, and threw it in the sink as I ran cold water over my hand. The welt on my hand had reddened and grown, but the pain dulled and the answering machine, flooded with water, was ruined and quiet. For a minute I stood there, trying to recall the song I’d been humming. Then I gave up and measured tea leaves into a pot and poured the boiling water.

After the tea was ready I went to place the chair I’d bought in the middle of our living room, facing the bay window, out of line with the rest of the furniture. I set the pot of tea and a china cup at the foot of the chair and then sat down to watch the sun turn everything golden. In college I’d had a religious studies class in which we were taught to calm ourselves by breathing; I counted my breaths, testing how long I could hold the inhalation, exhaling reluctantly as if I believed carbon dioxide was vital to my body. When my husband came home he found me like this, my hair braided, my dress drawn up a little over my knees, the teapot empty on the floor.

“You look lovely,” he said.

“How was work?”

“Same old,” he said, and knelt beside me. “What’s wrong?”

“She only charged me a dollar,” I said. “I’ve always liked this chair.”

“What happened to your hand?” he asked.

“My uncle called,” I said. “While I was making tea. I broke the answering machine. I don’t want to talk about it.”

For a minute my husband was silent and I could see him struggling not to ask. Finally he swallowed something and said, “Let’s go out for dinner. A steakhouse.”

Silently I looked at my husband. He had a kind face, professorial, and I could see the first signs of wrinkles in his brow. In the evenings he spent hours hunched tenderly over student papers, trying earnestly to change a life.

“You’re sweet,” I said. I gathered my strength and stretched, arching my back. “I’m fine,” I said. “See? I’ll make you a steak burrito, no cabbage. Extra cheese.”

In mid-December, just before the worst of the holiday rush, my uncle died His youngest daughter called to tell me. Cremation, she said. The service is Thursday, bring flowers, he liked anemones. No pressure, she said. It’s just a quiet thing.

I hung up. From the kitchen window I could see the flowers planted between the rows of cabbage and potatoes in my garden. It was the end of the anemone season and most of mine had fully opened, flat pink and purple disks staring blindly upward. I wondered if my husband had shown my uncle the garden in November, if he’d known that now I would be looking at anemones, if he’d somehow planned to die before the tulips were in bloom.

I walked to the university and found my husband in his office, brewing a pot of coffee. He grinned when he saw me. I sat in his chair.

“Let’s go on vacation,” I said.

“Sure,” he said. “Where?”

“Somewhere tropical. Or maybe somewhere cold. Do you think they have flowers in Iceland?”

“They have flowers everywhere,” he said, “if you know how to look.”

“Don’t be philosophical. I want to leave.”

My husband sighed. The coffee trickled slowly into its pot, humming. “The semester’s almost over,” he said.

“My uncle died.”

My husband looked at me and reached out his hand to stroke my hair. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Are you sad?”

“Yes,” I said. “No. I hate coffee.”

My husband hugged me.

“Go home,” he said. “Sleep. Make some tea.”

I went home and lay in bed but found I couldn’t sleep. I put the sheets in the wash and sat on the floor in the laundry room, thinking the sound of the washer would calm or sedate me. Late in the afternoon my cousin called again to tell me my uncle had left me some money. “Quite a lot,” she said. “To be honest we’re confused.”

I said nothing, lacing the phone cord between my fingers.

“Well,” she said. “We’ll get you a check.”

I hung up and called my husband.

“That’s perverse,” he said.

“So I shouldn’t take it?”

“I didn’t say that,” he said. “Money’s money.”

“I have a headache,” I said. “I can’t think.”

“We can use it to buy new windows,” he said.

“Is it hush money?”

My husband was silent. “I don’t know,” he said, his voice quiet. “A student’s here. I’ll be home soon.”

A few blocks from our house were new condominiums, built to look old, with exposed brick around every corner. I walked there and stood on the sidewalk looking up at the top floor, imagining the light up there, and then I went up with an agent to see the light for myself. The light was the same dust-flecked gold that comes in all full windows and I thought the architect must have been proud of the effect, of the way I felt I was standing on the edge of the world, as if I’d reached the end of some long journey and was now teetering here on the precipice of a warm and welcome death. I felt a certain resilience standing there, as if I was really the last human on earth, self-sufficient, noble.

A few days later my uncle’s check arrived in the mail and I bought the condominium. Then I went to the furniture shop to see the woman with the dark hair. She smiled at me and asked how the Edwardian chair was doing.

“Fine,” I said. “I put it in the living room.”

She frowned. “You said you had floral curtains in your living room,” she said. “It wouldn’t match.”

“I bought a condominium.”

She didn’t say anything but looked at me the way I felt a mother might. I pretended to be interested in an iron bedframe, decorated with iron roses. Then a leather stool caught my eye. It

was a deep ebony, smooth, and looked as if it would last through nuclear warfare, like a cockroach.

“Let me buy the stool,” I said. “For the condominium.”

“No,” she said. “It doesn’t suit you.”

I lowered myself onto the stool and straightened my back. I kept my legs uncrossed, bent sharply at the knees.

“I like it,” I said.

“Are you leaving your husband?”

I stared at her until she looked away.

“No,” I said. “I came into some money. It was the first thing I thought to buy.”

“We can make it homey,” she said, “Lace curtains, Victorian sofas. A real feminine retreat.”

For a moment I imagined myself in that kind of condominium, the open space converted into a perfumed boudoir, ceramic kittens posed on an imitation mantel. It seemed comfortable. It was the sort of home I grew up in. It would have ruined the light.

“Let me buy the stool,” I said. “It’s all I want.”

She sighed, but she gave in.

I took the stool up to the condominium and placed it in front of the windows. Then I walked around the room, looking at it from different angles, the leather probably already fading from the light. I thought it had a real presence, the kind that didn’t impose itself. A quiet strength. It reminded me of the ROTC students who walked past my house, the women’s hair coiled tightly into buns, their shoulders broad, and I imagined those women always looked

contained, compacted into a firm and concrete mold, even in the midst of war. It occurred to me that my uncle had wanted to apologize. I thought that was terrible. I began to think of my uncle as a failure of a man, a man who could not compose himself, a man with less bearing than a cockroach or a leather stool. He could've sent a letter, but he was the kind of man that depended on his voice, as if that mellow tenor that had told me, so many times, that nobody would know; that he would be gentle; that I was beautiful – as if that voice could have brought me at last back into his fold, as if I was the one that had strayed.

I lay on my stomach on the floor and then did a series of pushups, without counting. Then I lay on my back and looked at the unadulterated white of the new ceiling. Then I cried.

It was winter, and the days were short. The sun was already slipping. I told myself that when the light was gone I would call my husband and tell him I loved him. Then I would go home and order Chinese takeout and a home gym machine and open a bottle of wine, one we'd been saving. I thought life could be concrete from there on out. I thought it could be full of purpose. I thought of the way our house would be that night as we slept, moonlight slowly making its way through the rooms, the Edwardian chair obscured by shadows like the fade-out shot of a black-and-white film, my condominium remaining resolutely dark, out of sight, the leather stool waiting stolidly for my return.

Oranges in a Dead Rabbit

Tom came home with a rabbit in each hand. Both were a dull brown color, and one had a bald spot near its tail. It was clear the rabbits were old. Tom, with whom I was in love, couldn't have caught anything else. He was still stronger than me, but he'd lost weight and rashes had begun to appear on his legs.

"Rabbit again," I said as he approached.

"Either that or squirrel," he said.

I took the rabbits from him and carried them into the kitchen. Tom sat down on the front stoop and started humming to himself, something that sounded like a lullaby. He took a pocketknife out of his shorts and began cleaning dirt out of his toes. Beyond him was dust and a few lone trees, their leaves a faded green. Then there was the river, which was thick and muddy and barely moved. The river carried a certain smell. I was sure it was what had brought us the disease, but we'd long since been too weak to walk upstream – and if we had, we'd only have found more sick towns like ours, or a healthy town that would turn us out like lepers.

I skinned the rabbits and set the pelts aside. Then I gutted them. I began with the smaller one, which had the bald spot, gently slitting its belly open with the tip of my knife. I wondered about the rabbits, how they'd gotten stuck in our lifeless town. It was clear they were sick as well. Their skin, under their fur, was covered in the same rashes that covered me and that would

soon cover Tom. I scooped the small rabbit's guts out of its belly and then began cutting its meat into strips. Meanwhile Tom kept cleaning out his toenails. His arms shook. But his lullaby drifted towards me, as sweet as it'd always been. Tom was healthier than me; the disease killed painfully but slowly, and I figured that if I had one year left, Tom had at least three.

"Almost time to build a fire," I called to him.

"Sure," he said. He put his pocketknife down and began slowly picking himself up.

I turned back to the rabbits in front of me. For a moment I rested my upper body on the table. Then I pulled the second rabbit closer to me and began to cut it open. I thought I smelled oranges. Nobody had seen an orange tree in years. And yet when I scooped the rabbit's guts out I found five perfect and miniature oranges buried deep inside its belly.

"Tom!" I yelled. I stepped back from the table, not taking my eyes off the rabbit. "Tom!"

"Edna?" he said. His voice was thin. I knew he was off a ways, trying to cut some small branches off one of the last trees.

"You brought home a freak rabbit," I yelled. Then I sat down on the floor and wrapped my hands around my knees.

When Tom came in he went over to the rabbit and picked up one of the miniature oranges.

"What in the world," he said.

"I thought I was hallucinating."

"They're oranges," he said. His voice was quiet.

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe they're something else. Some new kind of disease, or –"

"They're perfect oranges. Small, but perfect. Look at them, Edna."

"Get rid of that rabbit."

He shook his head. Then he came over and knelt next to me. He reached out to give the orange to me, but I just watched it, resting like a jewel in the palm of his hand. It was a pure orange, the brightest thing I'd seen in months.

"Eat it," he said.

"What if it's poisonous?"

Tom laughed, then choked on his laughter. "What does it matter?" he asked. "We're dying."

Slowly I took the orange and turned it around in my hands. Its skin was smooth and cool. I wanted, more than anything, to puncture its skin with my fingernail and suck out the juice. The river's water was more mud than anything. The thought of the orange's juice made my hands shake.

"Go on," Tom said.

"I don't know."

"What if it's an antidote? A cure?"

"There is no cure. You know that."

Tom looked away from me. I knew he knew the orange wasn't a cure, but lately he'd been getting desperate, looking for any new herb growing by the house, speaking of antidotes he said he remembered reading about in books. I looked at the orange and squeezed it in my palm. It was perfectly ripe. Slowly I dug my nail into it and began peeling back the skin. Instantly the room filled with the smell of oranges, heady and thick. It was as if we were being drugged with oranges.

Tom looked at me again and watched the orange in my hands with a kind of hunger I'd never seen before.

“Eat the whole thing,” he said. “Even the peel.”

“I’m not going to eat the peel.”

“Please, Edna. It’ll help.”

I shook my head at him but I began eating the orange, section by section, seeds and all. Then, to satisfy Tom, I began to eat the peel. Even the peel would’ve been the best thing I’d eaten in a year.

As soon as I’d swallowed the last of the peel Tom grabbed my arm and rubbed it, as if he were trying to erase the rashes there. The rashes were scaly and red and I’d long ago accepted them as permanent, but Tom still believed he could somehow cut them off, make my skin pale and clean again.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

I looked at him and tried not to notice how small he’d become, withered as though he’d spent his life underwater, drowning the whole time. I took his hand in mine.

“I feel a little stronger,” I lied.

He had three years left. For the first time I felt guilty that I would be the one who would get to die first.

Convalescence

Looking back I can see that I was maybe a little crazy long before the vegetables starting coming in. It was a long winter, dry, and in late November I fractured both shins when I fell off a ladder onto the dirt. The ground was that hard. I had been trying to scrape the remains of a robin's nest out of a birdhouse. The eggshells in the nest were broken and empty. Looking at them gave me a deep sense of calm, like maybe the empty space inside my belly was also a sign of a good thing – a sign that whatever used to be there had gone on to the place where it was really supposed to be. I looked up at the high November sky, searching for the first stars of dusk. That was when I fell.

My husband worked as an assistant at the vet. That was why we had so many cats. People that my husband knew could afford an extra animal routinely came to the vet with strays, as if the vet was a pound or an animal commune. My husband punched one of those people once. The vet made him take two weeks' leave. My husband told the vet he would quit if the vet wanted to hire someone who loved animals less; of course that didn't happen.

When my husband came home after punching the man at the vet, I wound athletic tape around his hand and kissed his knuckles, unnecessarily. I poured a saucer of milk for the kitten he'd brought home.

"You know cats aren't really supposed to have milk," my husband said.

I stroked the kitten's head with one finger. It tensed; it wasn't used to people yet. In a few weeks it would be lost in the fold of cats we already owned, indistinguishable from the other tabbies, its meow one drop in the collective din.

"Let them eat cake," I told my husband. The quote wasn't an exact fit but I figured it was good enough.

The thing with my husband is that he never brought home the dogs. My psychiatrist tells me he was maybe afraid of losing his masculine authority in our home, and that was maybe part of the problem. Nobody's ever heard of an alpha cat, or a police feline. Cats don't guide the blind. I shrugged at my psychiatrist. It made no sense to me. Maybe people just don't bring in as many dogs as cats, I said. Maybe so, the psychiatrist said. Her face wore a neutral look that almost masked the fact that she pitied me – Poor thing, she would have been saying, What was it your mother taught you?

We were happy. After I fell, and had a neon cast put on each of my legs, I learned to cross-stitch. I couldn't walk, and I needed something to do while my husband was at work. For a long time I stitched samplers of roses and daffodils. My husband couldn't afford to have them all framed, but I sewed a small loop onto the top of my samplers and had him nail them on our kitchen wall, above the stove, where I could see them from the kitchen table where I worked. When my hands got tired of stitching I looked out the kitchen window. I began to notice things I couldn't remember seeing before, like a frog in winter. It kept sticking its tongue to the ground. Our pond out back had long since frozen. Why was the frog not dead?

My husband wanted me to stitch samplers of the cats, because we had so many, and they meant so much to him. But for me a frozen cat was wrong.

“Cats are beautiful in motion,” I said.

“Huh,” he said, and opened a beer. For a minute I felt slighted, but after all what was it he was supposed to understand? I had a beer too. We watched the evening news, his fingers idly combing out my hair. I felt like I was in the warmest part of a deep and wonderful sleep.

I didn’t work because I didn’t need to work, and because there was nothing in particular I wanted to do. I hadn’t gone to college. I’d worked for a while as an insurance saleswoman, and then I’d married my husband. I never got pregnant – that was just how things happened, which was fine. The vet gave all of our cats free shots and worm medicine as part of my husband’s pay. Before I broke my leg, I gardened. I took long walks and talked with the neighbors and cooked our meals. It was really a pleasant life.

There was a small patch of clover outside the kitchen window, which was how I discovered our rabbits. There were two of them, both undersized even with their winter coats. They came to nibble the clover every morning, their ears twitching nervously, always looking out for our cats. When the rabbits saw a cat, they froze, and the cat often almost had its jaws around them before they hopped away. But we had too many cats to feed, and it was only a matter of time. In February, a tabby caught the first rabbit. Two days later, a calico caught the second. All of this played out in front of me, on the other side of the kitchen window. When my husband came home I asked him to find the bodies and bury them, although I knew it was too late.

“We can’t feed all of the cats,” I told him. I had told him this before. “We have to let some of them go. Susan, down the road – she said months ago she’d take one, even two.”

My husband was at the stove, stirring something. He shrugged, gestured vaguely with the spoon. “They’re fine,” he said. “They eat.”

“It’s unhealthy,” I said. “And we don’t have any birds. The whole block – no birds.”

“You need some wine,” he said. “The cats are fine.”

There are things you’re told, you know – that as long as your hands are busy you’ll be alright. But I was stitching scenes I saw in front of me, like worms struggling up through bedrock and a mangled frog in the mouth of a cat, and that was getting a little strange. My psychiatrist says that my husband willfully did not notice, but I knew he’d read the books: don’t constrict a woman’s genius. He hummed as he cooked our dinners. He was always a little too tired to make love.

It was around this time – though then, of course, I didn’t connect the dots – that I found a hummingbird in our bed. It wasn’t a hummingbird in the physical sense but it was a beautiful sort of space, a beautiful sort of form – something in the depression of my pillow and the thickness of the air. It smelled nice, like a memory of my grandmother. My husband was asleep; he wouldn’t have been able to tell me whether or not there was really nothing there. When I shook him he just squeezed my hand in his sleep and snored. Besides, which of these things is real: the hummingbird, the cat scratching at our door, the sirens out in the street? There were all of these things I couldn’t see and this one darling thing that I could.

Two days after I had my casts taken off, I tripped over one of the cats and broke my left leg again. It was a different bone this time. My husband, when I told him that I would need another cast, touched his nose to mine and laughed. I felt air whooshing through my stomach, which was hollow. Of course my husband loved me. I chose a green cast.

My psychiatrist tells me that it's important to know where the seeds of sickness come from. When she says that, I imagine a watermelon seed that grows into a beanstalk which rends the clouds, touches the stars, and then falls like Babylon. My psychiatrist says that maybe there was a time in childhood when my diaper wasn't changed, when I saw something I shouldn't have seen. I don't deny the possibility. But what is real for me is the image of the beanstalk, rising up, and the way I began to see the shadows of things, as if reality was only a curtain that turned translucent when held up to the right kind of light.

There were roses in my kitchen, creeping up out of the cracks in our linoleum, and water rushing from the faucet even when it was turned off. More and more I set my cross-stitching down on the table and closed my eyes. My psychiatrist tells me that the roses were not visions but only phantasms brought on by a depressed and claustrophobic mind – but I was starting to get headaches. All day I heard cats padding softly from room to room, shadow cats that stirred up dust that got into my nose and eyes. I thought of bandaging my husband's punching hand and realized I wouldn't know, now, which way to wrap the tape or how tightly to secure it. Perhaps in that small loss of knowledge I'd let my husband down; over and over I woke him in the middle of the night, telling him the hummingbird was growing horns. I don't know what I thought. I'd never been the type to believe in the devil. My husband gave me sleeping pills, and rubbed my back while I tried to sleep.

“I can’t do this much longer,” I said. “Some of the cats are starving.”

My husband was silent. In the morning he told me I’d been talking nonsense in my sleep. Nobody was starving. The cats, he said, were happy. He wasn’t the kind of man who would just let a thing die.

I knew it was spring when bees started showing up at the clover patch. They were happy bees, busy bees. I tried to imagine being them, with a small furry body and no taste for anything but nectar. They were skittish of the dragonflies when they came. They were like the nervous twitching of the rabbits’ noses. For days and then weeks I hardly moved. My legs lost a lot of strength.

“My doctor says I need to do some exercises,” I told my husband over dinner. We were eating the last of the vegetables we’d canned the previous summer. My husband had cooked them in a stew. He was a better cook than I had been.

“If I don’t do exercises,” I told him, “I’ll just keep breaking bones.”

My husband chewed a piece of cornbread and swallowed some water.

“What you need is rest,” he said.

I stared out the window and watched a line of ants carry a potato chip home, until my husband finished eating and cleared my plate away.

“Angel,” he said, and kissed my forehead. I looked up at him, and it struck me that he didn’t really look like a man. I could see the lines of his nose and neck, and the different gradations of pink on his skin, but I felt like I was looking at an abstract painting. Nothing would coalesce into anything familiar. My husband, undisturbed, made me a cup of chamomile tea. And it wasn’t until I dropped the cup that I felt in my bones what was coming – the inevitable break,

the pain of divorce, learning, finally, to walk again in time for the robins to nest. All of that was only one shadowy possibility, the thing that, as I took the cup of tea unsteadily in my hands, I would have least expected; but my psychiatrist tells me I should have seen it coming all along.

Blue Jays

My grandmother stood at the sink, scrubbing the dishes. She'd made omelets for lunch. A few half-glasses of milk still sat on the counter where my little cousins had left them before running out to take a turn riding on the old tractor behind my grandfather. It was my grandfather's birthday. A pig, which would soon be barbecue, was roasting out front. Around dusk the neighbors and the rest of the family would come over to eat, and my grandfather would sing happy birthday to himself, playing his banjo, and towards midnight we'd pull out the wine from the cellar. But that was several hours in the future. For the moment I leaned heavily against the kitchen counter, listening to my grandmother hum as she did the dishes. I was twenty-three and pregnant for the first time, and just starting to show. My husband was on a business trip in Cincinnati; we'd been married six months and not been apart a night until then.

My grandmother didn't talk much. She was a solidly built woman, and pretty. She had her hair pinned back with a barrette I'd bedazzled for her as a child. For a while I watched her hands on the dishes, soaping them up and scraping off bits of egg with her fingernail. I ran my finger around the rim of a milk glass. The glass was plastic, and didn't make much sound; it was a peaceful day. The cousins outside were fighting over something, and the dog barked.

My grandmother dried her hands on a towel and peered out the window for a minute. From where I stood I couldn't see anything outside.

“Thought I saw a blue jay going in one of the birdhouses,” she said. “But it was just my eyes fooling me.”

“They haven’t been nesting this year?”

“They’ve built a nest in one of them, over by the woods, but the rest are still empty. They say it’s because we had such a cold winter.”

“They don’t migrate, do they?”

“No, they stay right here. I watched them all through the winter and past Christmas I remember thinking there was less than there should’ve been. But that’s God’s way.”

I nodded a little and went back to running my finger over the milk glass. It was a blue plastic glass that my grandparents had had for as long as I could remember. The light shone through it in a pretty way that used to remind me of Cinderella’s castle lighting up at Disney world. Once the glass had had a twin, but someone broke it, and after that my sister and I always argued over who would get to drink out of the remaining one. My sister was twenty and still a college student, and she wouldn’t be coming until later that night.

“Stop worrying that glass,” my grandmother said, taking it from me.

I watched as my grandmother rinsed the blue glass and poured in sweet tea. She had a Tupperware container full of lemon wedges in the fridge, and two pitchers of tea - one made with Splenda and one made with real sugar. She said Splenda gave her migraines, but she was aware that most of the other women in the family were watching their weight. Her own tea was already in a twenty-four ounce travel mug from Disney world, patterned with repeating images of Dalmatians. I hadn’t seen her drink out of anything else in years.

We went out on the back porch and found the dog chasing one of the cousins, Jake, around in circles. Jake was about six. He laughed and fell down and pretended to scream as the

dog came to lick his ears. My grandmother pulled two rocking chairs close together and told me to sit down.

“Now,” she said, settling into her own chair, “Have you thought what to name the baby?”

“It’s only been three months.”

“You’ve thought about it.”

She was right. I’d thought about it. My husband and I had even begun discussing it, throwing out suggestions as if it didn’t really matter to either of us if the child was a boy or a girl or if it had a Biblical name or a presidential one.

“Ruth,” I said. “I’ve thought about Ruth.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I leaned back so my chair rocked a bit, and placed one hand on the hard knot in my belly. “It just seems right.”

My grandmother nodded. “It’s a solid name,” she said. “She’ll be a strong woman.”

“What makes you think it’ll be a girl?”

“You’re the one who said it would be.”

I laughed a little and looked away. I was aware that I was blushing. I’d never believed before that women could know their child’s gender, as if by magic. But there was something about the feel of the lump in my belly; I imagined the developing fetus curled in a particularly feminine way. This was something I hadn’t yet admitted to my husband.

“Women know,” my grandmother said. “Don’t worry. Look – there’s a cardinal in the persimmon tree.”

I looked to where she was pointing. There was a cardinal, twisting his head around. I remembered learning in school that cardinals mate for life. This one looked confused to be alone,

as if his mate had left just minutes before, veering off into the sky too quickly for the cardinal's eyes to follow. I wondered if he was aware that the small red feathers of its crown were swaying comically in the breeze.

In the distance we could see the blue tractor moving slowly through the paths between the fields, though it was impossible to make out how many children were riding on it. Jake, who'd been chased by the dog, was swinging contentedly, pushed by a girl named Lisa who was a little older. Our fields – my grandmother's, by law – were all leased out to other farmers who'd made the switch from tobacco to soybeans twenty years before. We'd tried in the years after my grandmother's father had died to get her to move to a condo somewhere, but she held onto the land as if it was a fifth limb. She'd been born here, she said, and she would die here. Secretly we felt sorry for her, as if because she'd never left home she'd never truly been free.

Jake made a jump off his swing and landed hard on the grass and began to scream. It was clear he'd skinned his knees. Lisa stepped back a little, and blushed. In the distance we could see the tractor beginning to return to us.

"Jake, honey, come here and let me see," my grandmother said.

"Lisa," I said, "Don't cry, it's not your fault."

The children both came running to us and we led them inside. I sat across from them at the kitchen table as my grandmother went to get Band-Aids and Neosporin. Jake and Lisa were both towheads, but the roots of Lisa's hair were already beginning to turn brown.

"So," I said. "What grades are you guys in?"

"She pushed me," Jake said.

"Did not," Lisa said.

"She didn't push you," I said, "I was watching. Are you excited for the party tonight?"

“Pawpaw said if I burn the marshmallows he’ll eat the burned part for me,” Lisa said.

“Did you get him a birthday present?”

“No,” Jake said.

Lisa’s face began to pucker again. I could tell she was going to be a perfectionist, the girl the boys would call a robot in middle school; in college she’d keep attending church long after all of her friends had stopped going, and when she married a businessman she’d give unseemly amounts of money to homeless men she passed in the street. I felt sorry for her. I rubbed my belly quietly and thought of Ruth. My grandmother was right; Ruth, unlike Lisa, was a strong and solid name.

My grandmother came back in, cleaned and bandaged Jake’s wounds and sent them both back out to play. She refilled her mug of tea and sat down across from me and reached up to repin her hair.

“Sometimes I feel like I’ve already lived far longer than I should have,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“It just seems I’ve done the same things over so many times. I could’ve lived this day in my sleep.”

I rubbed the small of my back, which had started to ache, and wondered how much the pain would intensify in the months to come. My husband had started a new job, and I was scared that things like the Cincinnati business trip would keep coming up. He had begun lately to talk about travel in an abstract and poetic way that confused me.

“Don’t you ever want to get away from here?” I asked my grandmother.

“Sure,” she said. “I’d like to get out and visit the Grand Canyon someday, see the Western part of the country. My dad was always watching Western films.”

“Why don’t you go?”

“Your grandfather doesn’t like to travel except to go to Disney world. You know that.”

“Couldn’t you go without him?”

“No,” she said. “We’re married. We don’t like to be apart.”

My grandparents had married at seventeen, and for the first decade of their marriage they’d lived in my grandmother’s childhood home until my grandmother’s father had built her a separate house, small and square but, as she said, more than adequate. It was true that my grandparents were never apart. They’d always come together to my piano recitals and graduations. For my baby shower they’d given me a crib, a hand-carved family heirloom that they’d spent the whole of February refinishing. My husband had thought the crib ridiculous, and wanted to buy a new one with top safety ratings from Kmart, but I’d loved the crib for as long as I could remember. I’d slept in it myself as a newborn.

My grandmother closed her eyes for a minute and I looked out the kitchen window. My grandfather was lifting Jake onto the tractor, giving him pride of place behind the wheel, presumably because he’d skinned his knees. Everyone in our family was too kind to children. It was inevitable that Ruth would grow up spoiled and entitled. Not for the first time I felt a small prick of uneasiness: I didn’t want to bring a monster into the world. I didn’t know how to raise a child.

“I’m scared,” I said.

My grandmother opened her eyes slowly and looked at me.

“Everyone’s scared the first time,” she said. “It’s nothing special.”

“But I mean – what if my husband doesn’t come home?”

“Why wouldn’t he come home? He loves you.”

“But lately – ”

“Hush. You’re always building things up in your head.”

Outside my grandfather was starting the tractor up again, and the kids were laughing at the way it suddenly vibrated and lurched forward, like an old horse that scents a mare. My grandfather was wearing a straw hat; he looked like a farmer. I could see in his sunburnt face the men that came before him, each of them wearing the same straw hat, stretching back over the land without end. Our family had lived in these parts for decades. Six different churches in the area had the bones of my ancestors in their graveyards. If there was anywhere that I should have felt protected, surrounded, it should have been here. My grandmother smiled at me from across the table.

“Look,” she said. “A blue jay – hanging on to the feeder.”

She went to stand before the window to watch more closely. If I could love my child half as much as my grandmother loved the birds, I would be a good mother. I wished my grandmother would tell me, point by point, all of the things I wasn’t doing wrong; I wished my husband would call unexpectedly, as he’d sometimes done when we were dating. But there was only the retreating sound of the tractor going out to the soybean fields, and the whistling of the birds. My grandmother, her back towards me, laughed at something I couldn’t see. I thought suddenly that I still didn’t know, when the baby came, which way I was supposed to lay her in her crib.

Queen

Before we slept together I watched you have sex on a couch with my friend at a party. It was one of those parties that surprises people with what can happen. You were clutching a bottle of rum like a child clutches warm milk, even after my friend took off her panties and got on top of you. A lot of us watched. We'd never seen anything like it. It was not entirely clear that you realized what was happening, because although you performed the expected motions you kept saying *I love rum, rum is so great*, and looking at us like you were expecting an answer. You said later that you didn't remember things very clearly, but someone had taken a video of it from start to finish so that we could watch it over and over again, at future parties and between classes, and sometimes you even watched it with us, asking, *Is this humanity? Is this the pinnacle of civilization?* But there was something beautiful about it all the same. You didn't look bad, naked.

A year or so later I felt sick at a different, older sort of party, and you took me to get ginger ale and I invited you into my bed. We weren't good friends. We had met accidentally our freshman year of college, at convocation. I kept running into you at parties and lectures, kept saying *hi* and then moving distractedly away. There was never anything sexual about you, not until I saw you having sex on a couch. After that we all bought you shots whenever we saw you, hoping for a repeat performance, an encore, so that maybe we could figure out how a thing like that had happened – but except for that one time, you held your liquor well. You didn't look at

anyone's chest. I started to think that was the only time you had had sex in your life, on a couch with a friend of mine who wasn't unattractive but certainly you could have done better. You were enigmatic and I started to think that was unfair, as if you were doing it on purpose.

The thing is that with someone like you, after watching something like that –the video was on Youtube by then – it would have been impossible not to take advantage. The ginger ale ballooned in my stomach, so that my body was warm and my sickness was gone. You walked me home and I lied about how I was feeling: I wanted to lie down, I didn't want to be alone. You were kind and not unwilling.

You weren't good at sex. It took you so long to figure out where to go, and every time you bumped into my thigh you said, *I'm so sorry*, and I had to close my eyes before I rolled them so that you wouldn't see. You seemed delicate and frail. You had skin like a baby's. I guess we had never really understood you – you were the one-time exhibitionist, to us, and what more was there to say? Except that you knew where to go for a brand of Mexican ginger ale that cured everything. You were as easy to lead as a lamb, and I thought that maybe all those years with all those girls you were only waiting for someone to say, *Come here. Take off your pants*. But you had no sense of direction. My friend said you'd given her a good time on the couch even though you were mostly unconscious so I thought about slipping out of my bedroom to get you more tequila. But it was way past late and I was tired and you were cute under my quilt with your face screwed up to one side in concentration.

This was a different kind of sex from what I'd had before, but then there were so many things I'd never done. I thought of all the girls in my English classes who were so beautiful and unsure and how I'd never touched any of them. I'd tried once at a party my sophomore year but the girl had started puking before I could get her pants unzipped. But she and I weren't in love or

even friends. I wanted to touch her because I knew I would never grow into a felinity like hers, that kind of calculated grace that made me hate my thighs – what made her so symmetrical and slim?

Softly I arched my neck and licked the tip of your nose, which made you laugh. Almost there, I told you. You were really very cute. When you slipped in there was a look on your face like ohmygod and I thought all dogs really do go to heaven and then that was that. I guess you weren't so bad once you got inside.

I hoped you would remember it in the morning, the way you hadn't remembered my friend on the couch. Maybe this would be the time you would think of, years later when you were married and your new wife asked about how you had lost your virginity. Maybe it was what I would think of too, and surely my husband would find that funny: a boy who had sex on a couch at a party. It was easy to picture, the way my husband would chuckle and I would pretend to be embarrassed and then we would lie on our stomachs and watch TV.

But then it would have been impossible to explain to my husband the sweetness of the Mexican ginger ale and the way I was starting to believe you were a good and wonderful person. If you had been ten and I had been nine, you would have played checkers with me every day after school. You would have rubbed my back and helped me braid my hair. While you were inside of me I was remembering things like the first time I got a hula hoop to stay around my waist and how sexy I felt then, nine years old, hula hooping to Hawaiian music at a pool party. If you had been there you would've applauded and I would've blushed.

So that's why I started crying as you came, because you hadn't been at the pool party. You didn't braid my hair or rub my back when I was nine. There were so many times when we should have done it but didn't, like my thirteenth birthday when my sister smashed a chocolate

cake into my face and I needed so badly some sort of love but you were all the way across the country learning to masturbate. When you finished coming you looked at me for a minute and then you started crying too, probably just because I was crying, but it was the sweetest goddamn thing in all the world. And I thought how if you had been with me from the time I was two my life would have been so different, so simple. You would have proposed to me on my kindergarten playground and given me a crown of flowers to wear in my hair and that would have been that: a queen for life, happily ever after, amen.

Perfect Corpse

When I was driving home I hit a deer. It was midnight in a remote part of the country and I wasn't used to driving without street lamps. I'd been thinking of the things the shadows could be, conjuring spider webs the size of men and telling myself I was at the genesis of a new world in which everything ghastly had yet to be created. I was enjoying creating the ghastly things. The clouds were thin and I imagined they were really ghosts, dead bodies that had no skin or muscle or blood.

When the deer came I thought I was going to die. It leaped and landed on my windshield and I let the car drive itself into the ditch. When we settled the deer was still there, its fuzzy body draped like a coat on my car, and between its hooves I could see tall winter weeds. I was interested to know if the deer was dead. Maybe I would have felt some sort of pride if it had died. At least I could have claimed some sort of triumph.

I'd always thought I'd think of you in the moment before my death, but when the deer hit my car I only thought about the whiteness of its tail. I didn't think about the first time I saw you naked or the way you said my name. I didn't remember the way you looked at me in the morning. There was no first kiss or honeymoon, or any of the private milestones we told each other we'd reached: bagging the other person's vomit, knowing when to disagree, having lunch

with each other's odd and distant siblings. I didn't remember the cruise we'd booked or the Sundays we'd played at being Catholic or how we'd talked about putting in a pool.

When I got out of the car and approached the deer I noticed I was entirely whole. I didn't have one scratch. I reached out a finger to feel the deer's neck but the deer hopped up and bounded away before I could count out its pulse. That was most likely a miracle. I knew that even then. I said the word *miracle* to myself but the night air was thick and seemed to swallow my voice as if I'd never spoken. I leaned against my car. I thought about praying but didn't. I waited for the world to switch tracks, to regain a sense of normalcy – a star would've been nice, a familiar constellation.

I didn't call anyone. The deer hadn't died, and my car seemed fine. My heart was beating regularly. My skin was without blemish. I realized that I would've been, just then, the perfect corpse. I wouldn't even have needed to be embalmed. Would you have loved me if I'd been in a coffin when we met? I imagined my body wrapped in a green dress and placed in a plain wooden coffin, as if the coffin were a frame and my body a work of art. Varnished acrylic on canvas. You could've put me above your fireplace, shown me off to your friends. You could've bought me cheap.

But I knew better: you wouldn't love a thing like that. You loved my imperfections. I got back in my car and started the engine, which rolled over as it should, a regular and steady purr. There was a carwash on the way home, just inside the city, where all I had to say was *Deer* and they nodded and did the work for me. After all, as the attendant said to me, there weren't enough hunters anymore.

And too many deer, I said.

Right, he said. He grinned at me. His teeth weren't really as bad as I'd been expecting.

You could ask me now why I let him think the deer was dead. I could have an answer for you: It's easier to think of the deer that way. It's the expected thing. It doesn't matter.

But what I think is that the deer is probably crippled now. It might, who knows, never have a child. Such a flawed creature: how easy it is to love. I prefer the deer to be dead. Maybe only the bones would be left now, pretty and white in the woods somewhere, blending in with the snow.

I'm forgetting that the car was clean when I got home, and that you were already asleep, and that the week had been a busy one. There was no need for you to know. You would've said, if I'd told you, You poor darling. And I would've been too weak to tell you: You're wrong. That isn't how things were at all.

Proposal

William was from Florida. He and I lived together for a time while I was in grad school, in Virginia. William worked at the deli down the street from our house; he had a story about how he'd ended up in Virginia, and I'm sure there were a few girls involved, maybe a sense of destiny, but when he told me about it I wasn't listening. I'm sure there were other things on my mind – the atrocity of student papers, a new piece of theory about medieval poetry, a man who'd flirted with me at the store. William had a soft voice, which I assumed was because he was from Florida. I'd never been to Florida; I thought of it as a sort of magic land or fifties' time capsule, full of outdated beach music and pineapple-printed pants, women floating lazily in pools, everything muted by the heat. Certainly William was like that. He was a large man and moved slowly, as if he was constantly uncertain of his destination – the backyard? the shower? – and he spoke slowly, as if the words had to be first dredged up from some briny depth. I loved William, but at the time I didn't take things seriously. I thought we were only playing house, biding time until some other, more romantic love would come into our lives. He was as much a brother to me as a lover.

It was on one of the first really chilly nights of the year, near the beginning of November, that I heard William vomiting in the bathroom. I'd meant to go to a party my department was having for a faculty member who'd just announced her retirement, but when I'd gotten there I'd

found the heavy air of the banquet room unbearable. A month or so earlier I'd begun to notice the strained look of the women academics, the bareness of their ring fingers, the way even the most feminist among them had resorted, at last, to powder foundation and lipstick. I told someone I was suddenly feeling unwell and went home. Our tiny house, when I pulled into the driveway, was well-lit and unassuming. I unlocked the door with a buoyant feeling – of escape, of release – and smelled onions browning on the stove.

“William,” I said. “I’m home early.”

William, who wasn’t in the kitchen as I’d thought he’d be, didn’t answer. I walked into the hallway and saw light coming from under the bathroom door. I went to lean against the doorjamb and knocked twice.

“William,” I said.

For a minute there was silence and then I heard him give a dry heave, flush the toilet, run water at the sink. Eventually he opened the door. His face was pale and under his eyes a few capillaries had burst.

“Anna,” he said. He sounded surprised.

“Didn’t you hear me knock?”

“No.” He crossed his arms and smiled at me. “I like that dress on you, you know. What happened to your function?”

“Party.”

“Party, function – you didn’t stay?”

“It was dull. There was no one to talk to. What’s the matter with you?”

“I’m fine. I’ve just started browning onions. I thought I’d make spaghetti.”

“Didn’t you just throw up?”

“Oh – I had some spoiled milk this morning. I should be fine now.”

I reached out to place a hand on his stomach, which was as warm as a cat curled in the sun. I smiled at him.

“I love you so much,” I said.

He grinned, kissed the crown of my head, walked back to the kitchen. I followed him. I sat at the table and watched him make spaghetti. He was a good cook, and he could’ve done far better than the deli where he grilled paninis hour after hour. Occasionally, when the head chef wasn’t in, he made the potato salad and slaw, but for the most part it was only piling ham and cheese on toasted bread, asking the customer if they wanted mayonnaise or vinegar. I told him to apply for work at a real restaurant, but he said he liked the deli. *Humdrum*, he called it, as if that was a good thing. But he was from Florida; he was a large and fumbling man.

“I saw a fireman rescue a cat on the news today,” he said. He was searching for something in the refrigerator, his back towards me.

“Oh?” I said. I was staring out our kitchen window, trying to separate my reflection from the darkness outside. If we’d had Andy Griffith on TV I would’ve felt like a child again, sitting in the kitchen while my mother cooked.

“Sure,” William said. He emerged from the refrigerator with a bulb of garlic. “It was on Jameson street, a few blocks down. A big black cat was up a tree. It was a huge cat - fatter than me.” He patted his belly, laughed a little, smashed the garlic with the flat of a knife. “They had the whole truck out there and everything, a whole crew of firemen and a crowd of neighbors watching. It was heroic.”

“Doesn’t that happen all the time?”

“Does it?”

“Seems like I’m always hearing about that.”

“I thought it was just a trope. Something they put in storybooks. I used to have a cat when I was a kid, a tabby, and he climbed up a tree and sat there meowing his head off for hours. We called the fire station but they said they had to keep their trucks at the station in case there was a real emergency. We ended up calling a neighbor who had a tree-cutting business and some ladders.”

I watched him as he diced tomatoes, rummaged in the pantry for rosemary and cilantro, stirred everything together, put the lid on the pot then took it off to stir a little more. Pasta was boiling on the back burner and the windows had fogged from the steam. When there was nothing to do but let the sauce simmer William sat at the table with me, staring at the foggy window without speaking, holding my hand. I was glad to be there instead of in the mildewed banquet room, glad I was still young enough to look forward to things. I was still daydreaming about trips to Europe, flings with dark Italian men at conferences on Machiavelli, a beach wedding, a white house next to campus with granite countertops even in the bathrooms. William squeezed my hand and got up to take the pasta off the stove.

In high school I’d dated a wiry boy with a head full of black curls. He’d asked me to the prom, driven me out to a parking lot by an abandoned grocery store, run the heat to fog up the car windows and pulled a cheap condom out of his wallet. I was as ready as he was. For months I’d watched him do laps in gym class, his gait as long and easy as a deer’s. He was dating a prim girl named Molly, and it was well-known that she wasn’t letting him get anywhere. When they broke up I started twirling my hair at him in class, brushing against him in the hallways. We were together for a few months, and we spent most of that time in cars, in the back stairwell, in

his basement, under the bleachers. Then Molly showed up the following August after a summer in Rome; there was something different in the movement of her hips when she walked. We all knew immediately. After the breakup I told my parents I was going to die; I made little cuts on my thigh with my razor; I started, every now and then, smoking cigarettes. I was proud of myself. I knew what love was. All of my relationships through college went this way – brief, passionate, sometimes bordering on violent. William, with whom I never fought, was not a love affair. I never had any plans to marry him.

After dinner I laid on the floor in the living room, grading papers, while William did the dishes. The floor shook pleasantly as he moved from table to sink, from sink to stove. I was ready to be lulled to sleep when William came into the living room and sat next to me on the floor. He brought his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them; he looked the way a large dog might look crouching next to a doll house. I laughed.

“What?” William said.

“Nothing,” I said. “You just look out of place.”

William looked at me and then slowly began rearranging himself until he was lying on his stomach next to me.

“Is this better?”

“It’s fine.” I reached over to rub his back. “Tell me about Florida.”

“What about Florida?”

“I don’t know – did you have a pool in your backyard? Is everyone tan?”

William frowned. He tapped his toes on the ground behind him. Sometimes I worried that he got caught up like this at the deli – if a customer asked him where the deli bought their bread, or if a song came on that made him remember something from elementary school, the way a

teacher's hair curled into a bun or the sad soggy bread of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, the jelly squirting meanly out the sides. William kept tapping his toes for a long minute, still frowning, gazing at the pattern of the wood floor beneath him.

"William," I said, running my hand through his hair.

"What?"

"Florida."

"Oh, Florida – Florida's not much different from here, you know."

"No differences at all?"

"People are less ashamed of being old, I think. But that's it."

William raised himself, inch by inch, off the floor, until he was standing like a kindly giant above me. From this angle his head was the size of a peanut, and all of a sudden I thought of Linus and Lucy and the charm of the music Lucy played on the little piano that vibrated so that I was afraid, always, that it would explode, each key popping off in turn. William moved lazily towards the bathroom. I thought of Florida, an orange grove in every backyard, white hair that glistened in the sun, the flat walk past a general store, left by the fortune teller's shack, down a little hill that crested with a view of the waves. There were lizards darting across the road, cicadas buzzing languidly in the heat, the heat waves shimmering like gasoline – and all the people moved slowly like William, unsure of many things but somehow dumbly happy. From the bathroom I heard stifled heaves, the flush of a toilet, William's footsteps heavy as bricks.

"William," I said as he entered the living room. "What's wrong?"

"Still the milk, I guess."

William looked shyly at me and sat on the couch. In his lap his hands made small gestures, as if they were speaking to each other. I had my head twisted around to look at him, but

he was looking again at the floor. I turned back around and massaged the tensed muscles in my neck. I still had twelve papers left to grade. I drew a series of curlicues in the margin of the paper in front of me, written by a sophomore named Maddie Harrison, who, if I remembered correctly, had a dowdy frame that she tried to improve with pushup bras; the boys in the class glanced at her now and then with something more like bewilderment than attraction. Her paper was longer than it needed to be. I capped the pen and rolled onto my back so that I was staring at the ceiling.

“William,” I said. “I poured the milk out last night.”

“Did you? Maybe it was something else, then. The butter or the cheese.”

I stared silently at the ceiling. Our house had been built a century ago, and the ceiling was made of thin wooden planks, painted white; in a bad storm there was a steady leak in one corner of the room, where we’d placed a ficus tree that could benefit from the damp. Sometimes I imagined cherubs and saints painted on the ceiling, or simple puff clouds set against a subtle blue; it would only take half an hour, forty-five minutes, to put newspaper on the floor, dip a roller into a paint can; and then a few small flicks of the wrist for the clouds, unplanned, appearing here and there like a hazy mist. But I liked the white ceiling as it was. *Humdrum*, I thought, and turned my head to look at William again. He had somehow begun to cry.

“If you’re feeling bad I’ll walk down to the store and get some medicine,” I said.

“No,” he said. “I’ll be better in a minute.”

“What about some tea?”

I stood up, went over to kneel in front of William. I placed my hand on the soft sphere of his stomach. “It’s like a cat curled in the sun,” I said.

William laughed, choked a little on his tears, ran his hand through my hair.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

William shrugged his shoulders and smiled. He stopped crying, though I could tell it took some effort. “See,” he said, “good as new. I’ll make the tea.”

He stood and lumbered into the kitchen, his hip knocking a little against the door frame. The kettle, which had been wet, sizzled a little when he first turned on the stove, but then it died down and there was only the pleasant hum of the gas. William stayed in the kitchen. I couldn’t see him. I tried, vainly, to whistle; as a child I’d never learned how. William, when we’d met, had said that he could teach me, and for a few weeks he tried, coming up with new metaphors for the placement of the tongue, the shape of the lips. I laughed too much to be able to whistle. Everything came out different than I’d intended. I shivered a little, and remembered that it was November; in another few weeks we’d have snow.

“William,” I said, hoping my voice would carry into the kitchen. “Has it ever snowed in Florida?”

William didn’t answer, but I’d asked him this question before and I knew the answer: once, when he was in preschool, but only for about half an hour and then it was gone. I don’t know why I was always asking him about Florida. I didn’t know what else to say to him. He worked at the deli; his days were all the same. Sometimes he would tell me about a homeless man in a wheelchair that had made a disturbance and been kicked out, or about a woman who had too many kids – I didn’t listen. I was daydreaming about a man with a brilliant thesis about American folklore or traditional Norwegian literature – a man who would have a collection of kitsch to put on our mantel, a man who admired the way my voice mellowed and deepened after I smoked a fat and dangerous cigar. William, when I smoked, suggested gently that I might find other, healthier hobbies.

In the kitchen, the kettle began to whistle. I waited for William to turn off the stove and pour the tea, but the kettle kept whistling. I closed my eyes. Where was William? But that was an unnecessary question. William was nearby. William was as constant as a dog. The kettle kept whistling; a stream of thoughts was rising in me. Why had I suggested tea? Everything was my fault. It had never snowed in Florida; even the half hour of snow in preschool had been my invention, a fantasy I'd repeated to him so often he'd finally begun to speak of it as true.

The kettle kept whistling and for a minute I felt panicked, naked. I'd felt this way as a child once, when my mother had left me in a grocery store. She'd forgotten me, driven home alone. I felt sick, crushed. I imagined William had disappeared, maybe raptured – he was a good man, the best, and I felt sure he'd been raptured, taken up to God who would never give him back. *I love you*, I whispered, too late, realizing, like a child, that I didn't know how to get on without him, not even how to tie my shoes.

Eventually he took the kettle off the stove and came back into the den with two cups of breakfast tea, though he'd meant, I was sure, to make chamomile. For a long time we sat in silence, until the tea grew cold. I reached out for his hand and saw him smile slightly. I didn't take my eyes off him for a second. I was trying to figure out how to propose.

Sadie

I met Sadie at the bus stop my last year of college. It was early December and the bus was late. I'd forgotten to fill my thermos with coffee and I'd torn a hole in one of my gloves. I was contemplating the inch of cream I'd poured in my thermos before forgetting to add the coffee when Sadie sat down next to me. I'd learned enough in my years of riding the bus not to look over at her – sometimes looking was a slippery slope, and a man who hadn't showered asked for your number at six in the morning. I tried my best to look cold and miserable, which under the circumstances wasn't hard.

But Sadie was either new to riding the bus or crazy. Almost as soon as she sat down she began to talk.

"Nice day," she said. "I remember there were days like this when I was a kid. Except the clouds were lower then and seemed friendlier."

I blew warm air on my hands and looked out across the road. Behind us were small houses built in the twenties that nobody cared enough to repair. Across the street was the water treatment plant with a sign that said in bright red letters that our water supply was at ninety percent of capacity. A crow swooped down and sat on the sign. There was no sign of the sun – only an inscrutable grayness. I didn't see anything nice about the day.

"Why do you think the clouds are so high up today, I wonder?"

I cleared my throat and looked deliberately away, at the weeds growing up between the cracks in the sidewalk. At this point I still had not looked at Sadie, but in order not to seem too impolite I shrugged my shoulders while looking at the weeds.

“You know I killed my cat yesterday.”

Involuntarily I glanced in her direction. She was staring at me. She had probably been staring at me the whole time. I realized with shock that she wasn’t any older than me – I’d imagined her with leathery skin and unwashed hair. But she was a pretty girl. Her hair was French-braided and she had makeup on.

“Oh,” I said. Now that I was looking at her I felt it would be rude to look away. “I’m sure you didn’t kill it on purpose.”

“Yes, I guess that’s true. Still, I could have checked to see where he was before I started backing up my car, couldn’t I? That’s what I usually did, because I knew he was deaf and liked to sleep right up against the car tires and didn’t hear when I turned the engine on. Lots of times I’d had to pull him out from under the car and sit him on the rocking chair on the porch before I left, so why didn’t I do it yesterday?”

I nodded my head slowly, maybe to show that I was listening, maybe to comfort her. I tried to think of a discrete way to check the time on my phone. I wondered if she didn’t have any friends to tell her story to, or if she was on bad terms with her mom – weren’t you supposed to call your mom when you were upset about things like this? I had two papers due that day, neither of which was finished, and I wasn’t sure I had enough money to pay my rent.

Sadie kept on staring at me. She seemed very earnest and sincere.

“People forget things sometimes,” I said.

“But I don’t think I forgot. I think I just got in my car and thought, if today’s the day he dies, God must have ordained it. Of course I don’t remember thinking that explicitly but I keep going over and over it in my head and I’ve decided that must have been the way it was. I guess I was tempting fate or something but I don’t know why. And if I was going to do that why did I have to get my cat involved? I raised him from when he was a kitten, you know.”

I tilted my head as if to show interest.

“I found him in a cardboard box at church – or one of the elders did, and they sat with him on the church steps and asked people if they wanted to keep him as they were walking into the sanctuary for the service. I was seven, I think – maybe eight - anyway we took him home and I bottle-fed him myself, because he was still so little, you know, and even when he was old enough for cat food all he wanted was milk.”

All of this time Sadie had stared at me, almost without blinking, but at that point she buried her face in her hands. She was very still. I don’t think she was crying. I sloshed the cream around in my thermos, just to make some sort of gesture. I looked at the clouds. Sadie was right: they really were quite high up in the sky, as if they were doing their best to reveal the sun, but still there was only the resolute grayness. And the bus hadn’t come – maybe it had broken down somewhere, a couple of stops before ours. Sadie was still and quiet for a long minute.

When she looked up I noticed again how pretty she was. She looked at me with the same intensity as before. I looked back. I was curious about her by then.

“Will you hold my hand?” she asked.

Without thinking I reached out and took her hand, which was impossibly warm.

“It’s like the clouds keep drawing up higher and higher,” she said, “like a curtain. I buried him with a carton of milk.”

Her hand was really very warm. Somehow I felt a sense of relief. I could let things go a little longer before they came to a head – phone calls with my parents, emails from my landlord. Nothing was going to burn down in ashes quite yet.

“The bus is coming,” Sadie said.

The bus was just appearing on the horizon. It still had a couple of stops to go before it reached us.

“It was sweet to bury him with a carton of milk,” I said.

They used to serve cartons of milk at snack time in kindergarten, and you could choose between strawberry, chocolate and plain. It was hard getting the cartons open but eventually someone showed you the trick to it and then it wasn’t so bad.

“My name’s Sadie,” Sadie said.

I squeezed her hand. The bus was advancing slowly towards us, shimmering in a drizzle that had started up. The grayness of the world was expanding out around us, unfurling like so many petals of a rose.

Thighs

I woke up to find that my thighs had grown an inch each. You asked me how I could know and I told you I didn't know but that it was clear that my thighs had grown. You felt them up and down and said you could find nothing strange and I said look at the length and the width and you said they are as smooth and lovely as ever and I said look, please, something's different. But it wasn't long before I gave up and we made love, and then smoked Cuban cigars in bed and spoke of making French toast for breakfast – but those things happened only in my head; in reality you kissed my thighs, one time each, and left for work, leaving me alone with an avocado and water boiling on the stove.

There are so many things I wanted to tell you and I was afraid you would die before I could. In my dreams I held a machine gun; you were a thin and screaming woman with perfectly coiffed hair, and I was meant to protect you from whatever violent force was coming. I unloaded and reloaded the gun but I wasn't strong enough to pull the trigger. You told me in a trembling voice that you weren't prepared to die. Through the jungle we could see blood approaching, splattered on trees like a trail of breadcrumbs; I dreamed of birds, orange and evil, coming to clean the trail before our bodies could be found, their wings unfurled against a green sky raining toxic gold. I didn't know why I dreamed of you this way – small, cowering, imminently

breakable. You were a good man but sometimes I thought I'd missed something, a small but fatal flaw like an ingrown toenail or the way you smiled at your mother. There must have been a reason the gun was in my hands and at the time I thought it was because we were meant to die together, butchered by some jungle monster with a twelve-horse engine, our organs intermingled sweetly on the ground.

But those were only dreams. There was nothing in the pot of boiling water; I sat watching the steam sweat against the walls. Eventually all of the water would boil away and the bottom of the pot would scald. I tried to eat my avocado quickly, before its flesh oxidized into a muddy brown. Perhaps by the time I finished you would come home with a box of chili-flavored chocolates and push me onto our bed, undressing me quickly to examine how much sexier I was now that I had this extra inch of flesh clinging to each leg. Then there was the chance that my thighs would shorten as the day wore on, sinking back into themselves until I was like other women, short-legged, naked, smelly, the extra flesh hidden deep somewhere in my body like a parasite or a permanent and unassailable dark magnetic force.

Dream

I have been dreaming that you came home from the Balkans and handed me a long and nonsensical letter that felt somehow urgent; dragons were involved; you said you didn't want to see me and yet you didn't leave. Five times in a night I dream this, waking up always afterward, laid out on my bed like a corpse on a dais, waiting for the priest's arrival so that I can be blessed. In the dreams I want to touch you but don't, and perhaps this is why I keep dreaming, hoping that in the next iteration you will look up, extend a hand. In the dream it is perhaps your belief that if I touch you one of us will die, of contagion or infection or divinity; the universe would be rent apart; the dragons would come. But the worst, I want to tell you, has already happened, and it wasn't you but me that suffered. I have never had a way to hurt you.